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SIDE:BLUE



Prologue: Sword of Damocles

"The Chosen Man" stands in the rain.

A cold rain which, at any moment, may turn into ice. However, the chill seeping into his skin and the uncomfortable sticking of his wet clothes are irrelevant to him. Each raindrop falls to the ground without a single one touching him, coincidentally avoiding his body entirely. Almost as if there is an invisible umbrella open above him.

"The Chosen Man" stands on a battlefield.

The exploding grenades, falling to the ground like a torrential downpour, however, stray from their vertical trajectory before impact, so he is unharmed by the scattering fragments. The stronger the power of the grenade, the further diagonally it strays from above his head.

So, what if an atomic bomb was to be dropped above "The Chosen Man"? Even if it glides diagonally away and misses ground zero by a few kilometers, he can no longer escape injury to his body.

However, destiny will preserve his safety to the last. As a result, what would happen?

Nothing.

The bomb will neither fall, nor will it explode. It will continue to exist, paused

in mid air still full of its fatal energy, above the invisible umbrella--

The above is a thought experiment called casually, "Umbrella and Bombs." It's an allegory for the Weismann Theory's concept of a probability point. The nature and abilities of the leaders chosen by and who could control destiny were first defined, measured, and theorized in Germany in 1944. Then, the following year the first scientifically defined "King" was born in the middle of conflict. In the midst of death and destruction, a shining sword hung over his head. This is neither an allegory, nor a fairy tale. This is historical truth.

But, perhaps--

If thought of as the point in time where the rules of the real world were rewritten, maybe it should be called a certain kind of fairy tale, a myth of creation. They twist, stop, and dominate with their will the laws of nature once controlled by microscopic coincidences and macroscopic certainties--the era of demigods.

201X - In a corner of the world, set on an island in the Far East, the prologue to this myth is still continuing.

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Casually, they're "superpowered."

Said a little more politely, they're "uniquely powered individuals."

Scientifically, they're "probability-inclined psychokinetics."

Legally, they're "persons retaining abilities caused by a unique phenomenon."

In the jargon within the police organization, they call them "supes."

When police officer Kusuhara Takeru first saw that, it was his second month as a part of the Metropolitan Police Department Riot Squad. It was his nineteenth summer. The strong rays of the sun reflected off of the asphalt. His protector and helmet were burning him up on both sides, and the sweat forming inside his uniform dripped to his feet and pooled in his boots.

"...It's hot," he murmured quietly.

Next to him, head patrol officer Tamura Atsushi, still facing forward, said shortly, "Don't lose focus."

"Ah... I'm sorry." As he answered, he moved his head slightly to catch a glimpse to see how Tamura was doing. He was six years older than Kusuhara. The younger members of the squad adored him like an older brother because of his more mature calm demeanor and good humored personality. That Tamura was unusually nervous. He couldn't see his expression behind the face shield, but he could feel a strong wariness from his small movements.

The robber had taken hold of a bank in the office district--that was how the situation had been explained to Kusuhara. They stood directly in front of the bank with its shutters down, gripping their riot batons and making a blockade line with their riot shields. It was a dangerous mission where they were literally bearing the brunt of the theft, but since Tamura had experience in scenes like this, he always kept a collected composure. To Kusuhara, that was reliable... But what about now?

He could overhear bits and pieces of the correspondence a platoon commander in the back row was having with command headquarters. There were two robbers. They had threatened the clerks at the teller window and taken the money, but since emergency communications were prompt and they ran into trouble retreating, they had failed to escape. They took some of the bank staff and customers as hostages and shut themselves inside.

It had been two hours since the incident. With communications open with the criminals on one hand and the information gathered from off-duty clerks and customers kept out from the hold, they were able use both to get a grasp on the situation. How the criminals looked, the number of hostages, the facilities within the bank--and most importantly, the weapons the criminals had. Most of the customers witnessed the gun pointed at the teller clerk and testified, "They shot the ceiling as a threat," "One of the fluorescent lights broke." On the other hand, there were others saying, "I didn't hear a gunshot," "It didn't go off," and that contradiction led investigation headquarters to call to mind one possibility.

"--Inclination levels have moved from 3.5 to 4. Assuming suspect as a supe."

"Understood. Assuming suspect as a supe and guard--"

Tamura's mouth stiffened at the overheard exchange coming from behind them.

"So it is a supe... Be careful."

"...What's a soup?" Kusuhara whispered back. Since Tamura had talked to him, he figured it would be alright to talk just a little bit. Rather, if he dared to

open his mouth in a situation like this, then he might have something important to say.

"A superpowered. You've heard of them, at least?"

"Ah yeah, like, a superhero--" When Kusuhara spoke, Tamura stirred and stood at the ready. The side entrance opened slightly, and a man in a brown beanie poked his face out. In his hand, he held a gun. Once in a while, the robbers would come and look at the outside situation like this. "...But he looks surprisingly normal."

"It's weird that he looks normal."

"Huh... Ah, okay," Kusuhara nodded. What felt "normal" was, more than the man's appearance, the impression he got from his movements. Whether it be a blade or a gun, the one holding the weapon will move with their consciousness centered on it. Holding it in front of them at the ready in order to use it at any time, or holding it with the muzzle or tip pointed down at the feet in caution--it would be an obvious thing were it a real gun. But were it to be a model gun or some other bluff, then they would most certainly try to deliberately show it as a real one. But this man wasn't showing the characteristics of an armed person. He was treating the gun in his hand carelessly, like a toy.

-- Why, in a tense scene of a crime, walking around carrying something like a gun, isn't he treating it like a weapon?

If Kusuhara put the "unnatural naturalness" he felt into words, that's what it would be. The answer was--

--Because the criminal had separate weapons for show and use. Then why didn't he show the weapon he used? He could think of two reasons: He didn't want to show his real weapon... Or, that weapon was invisible.

--Look carefully. There's something like a heat haze coming out from around his body, right?"

"Ah, you're right." At Tamura's words, Kusuhara nodded. "Kinda, like, waving..."

"By gravity or light or whatever, it's warping bit by bit."

"Ooh, gravity. I don't really understand, but that's awesome... Do they fly and shoot beams like superheroes in movies?"

"Nah, if his power's in the single digits, then he's got the strength of a kid at most."

"What," Kusuhara gave a wry smile. "His gun looks like a fake, so why don't we just charge in and hold them back?"

"Don't let your guard down," Tamura said with a hardened voice. "I almost died because of that."

"What?"

"This eye... I've only got half my eyesight in it." With a gloved fingertip, he tapped his face shield. "It'll be four or five years ago now... Had a run in with one of those supes. When we ran in with our shields, an invisible finger stuck me over my shield and into my eye. Like... twisted."

"Ew..."

"There were some other guys who got their brains smashed. You be careful, too."

"...Yes." Kusuhara nodded meekly, and stood on his toes to look over the riot shield. "If that's so, then we should definitely stay as far away as we can... Oh." His movement must have stood out within the group; the man in the beanie, who had been looking around at his surroundings, locked his gaze onto him and gave a light wave with his gun.

"...?" Kusuhara leaned forward--

--Idiot! Don't stick your head out!" Tamura said sharply, and Kusuhara involuntarily shrank back. At that moment, the man in the beanie swung his gun downward. It was almost like he was trying to hit someone in front of him with the grip, but--

Thump.

With a hard sound, the top of the riot shield was sliced off diagonally.

"Wah!?"

Kusuhara threw his head back, and Tamura yelled, "He's in range!"

--Pull back! All men pull back!"

The policemen around them withdrew like the receding tide. Kusuhara, who had fallen on his behind, and Tamura, who was grabbing onto his collar and dragging him, were left behind.

"Get rid of your shield! It's not gonna help!"

"O-Okay... Wah!?" The shield he had just tossed away was split in two in front of him, and a number of cracks ran through the asphalt at his feet. They were long, straight cuts, much like an invisible knife cutting butter. That "power" was surely no more powerful than a child's strength. But at the same time, it had more range and density than Tamura and the others had imagined. The unseen blade the superpowered himself materialized from over twenty meters away passed through the road surface on Kusuhara's sides and arrived at Tamura's feet.

Tamura fell with a grunt. The blood from his calf scattered on the asphalt.

"Tamura-san!?"

The moment he turned around, Kusuhara felt a strange sensation on his back. That omen of the wavering of narrowing space, an echo without a sound. The next attack was closing in on them.

His body moved reflexively against that invisible phenomenon. He got himself up, gripping the fallen riot baton by his feet and posing on one knee, he swung.

Clang! There was the sound of clashing metal. Then, the asphalt behind Kusuhara's left side cracked open. The wooden baton hit the invisible blade and made it change directions, and hit the road.

The man standing in the door at the far end of his sight was looking his way, puzzled.

-- That was...?

Kusuhara himself was also looking at the baton with wide eyes. Something like

a faint haze on his hand and baton wavered, then disappeared. When he looked back at the door, the man in the beanie was raising his gun again. Most likely, he used his attack with swinging his arm down like a sword. Timing it with the instant the man lowered his arm, Kusuhara stood, raising his baton in an uppercut.

Clang! Again, he flung away the invisible blade causing a hard and heavy response.

-- I can do this...!

Keeping his labored breathing under control, Kusuhara held out his 120 centimeter baton at the ready out in front of him, like kendo. He was able to block the "invisible attacks," which had been able to slice in two with no problem a thick polycarbonate shield, with a wooden baton - as irrational as that guess was, he had an intuitive belief. The feeling of the hit from just a moment ago still remained in his hands.

"Don't move!" The voice from the speaker he heard from above him was directed at the man in the beanie. Behind him, using the personnel transport vehicles as shield, a number of troops held submachine guns at the ready, pointing them at the man. This was no longer an average crime, and the response had changed to that of dealing with an armed terrorist attack.

"Put down your weapon and come forward, slowly!"

In this case, he didn't know how much meaning there was in making him throw away his "visible weapon." Were the man able to use his power unarmed, then

wouldn't taking away his weapon be impossible? But in any case, in this situation it seemed that his side would settle it in their advantage. With all the guns pointed in his direction, the man was no longer able to move. Were he to try to cut Kusuhara and the other troops, he would be showered with tens of bullets in the next instant. He had no choice but to obediently step down.

When Kusuhara let his guard down just a little, another man appeared from within the side entrance. It was the second man of the two criminals. His clothes were similar to that of the first man, but he was a bit taller, and his beanie was black. From his demeanor, he looked to be the leader. He seemed to be saying to the first man, "What's taking so long!?" In one hand, he was holding a simple gun.

"You two, throw down your weapons!"

At that voice, it seemed as though the man in the black hat realized the situation for the first time. Or he may have put on such an act on purpose. He looked around, and gave a shrug of his shoulders at the number of guns facing them. Then, the man tossed his gun as he was told. He let it go with a big, slow movement, as though it was a display to Kusuhara and the troops. Then--he swiftly swung his arm to the side.

Boo-boo- boom!

Suddenly, three personnel transport vehicles behind Kusuhara exploded. The mass of heat and impact from the inside of the vehicles ripped the frames off, and scattered iron scraps at high speed with the blast. His colleagues were blown away like splinters and hit the ground.

"Wha...!?" Kusuhsara winced, and at his feet Tamura groaned.

"Beta Class...!"

"Beta...?" When he tried to ask, the blast, delayed by a few seconds, hit his back, and he fell forward a step.

Clonk!

The baton was cut in half right in front of his eyes. He could see a smooth cross section, like a cucumber cut with a kitchen knife. While his attention was taken with the explosions behind him, the first man attacked with his "invisible blade." At the same time, there was a light impact on his forehead. For a moment, the image of his head and helmet both in round slices appeared in the back of his mind, and reflexively he threw off his helmet. Blood slipped down his temples. The blade had cracked his face shield and reached his forehead. But it was only a slight wound.

Preparing himself for the next attack, Kusuhsara held the halved baton at the ready, and brought it up to his face. Then the man in the black beanie pulled back the man in brown, and took a step forward.

Beta Class. That's what patrol officer Tamura had just said. It was probably about that guy. What did it mean? Was it the strength of his power? Or the type?

The man in the brown beanie attacked with an invisible blade, but the man in the black's weapon was most likely invisible bombs. Would he be able to block it with a stick? Hit the bombs he throws like a baseball... Could he do such a thing?

As he churned these thoughts, the expression of the man in the black beanie reflected in Kusuhara's eyes. His cheeks were twisted in a smile, and he thrust his fist in his direction--

As he opened his hand, in the far distance in front of Kusuhara a small thing burst out. A clump of very high energy with neither color nor shape--it seemed like the very air itself was compressed. In the next moment, it shone like the sun-

-- Will it explode!?

Kusuhara dropped the baton and covered his face with both his hands. At that moment--

Ting! With a high pitched noise, the explosion was sealed.

"Wha..." Kusuhara opened his eyes partway.

The strange and dangerous bomb was like a small sun the size of a fist, but an even more mysterious thing was covering the dazzling ball of light. It was a shining blue cube, about ten centimeters on each side. Like the bombs and the blade, it was not a normal object and seemed like a distortion of space, but it appeared in a shape he could clearly see. The bomb sealed inside was violently pulsating to release its fatal amount of heat, but it was firmly constricted, like shut inside a living crystal.

The blue crystal sealing the pulsating ball of light was a strange work of art that slowly spun before Kusuhara's eyes.

As his eyes were enraptured with that unrealistic sight, a voice from far behind

him spoke, "...You are quite the natural at this." It was a calm, well-carried voice. He turned around, and in the black smoke that lingered over the road, there was a strange group.

It was a group of about twenty, wearing an unfamiliar blue uniform. Each carried a long saber at their waist, and walked together at a calm pace. The image of them in two lines was almost like that of blue castle walls. Kusuhara was used to the sight of blockade lines made of armed riot policemen, but what made him still think so was that each man's existence was filled with some sort of energy; an immensity of each presence. The man standing in the middle of the line stood out even among them. He was most likely the leader of this group. From his rather thin and tall body and spectacled, intelligent features he had a presence that almost overwhelmed everything around him.

"There are many of those who manifest their power in the shape of a sword. That is because the sword itself is the symbol of the most fundamental offensive ideal and the will--it is an extension of your arm in a hard and sharp form."

Keeping his pace, the man in glasses spoke to Kusuhara.

His interest was for some reason directed not to the bombs that destroyed the large vehicles, nor the injured lying here and there, nor the superpowereds who caused their injuries, but to Kusuhara.

"However, those who can use their sword for protection are few. You strike against and stop a sharpened and concentrated will off attack with your own just as, or even more, concentrated will. An innate talent over simply technique is necessary for such an unusually difficult action." When the man came in front of

Kusuhara a smile appeared on his face, and he placed a hand on the protector's shoulder. "Indeed. That was you just now. It was truly excellent. ...But afterwards was not so good."

"Huh...?"

The man in glasses concentrated power into his hands slightly, and Kusuhara took a step back. Then he extended his hand to the crystal remaining in mid air, and it moved to his palm and began to slowly spin there.

"If you hold on to your will strongly, everything within reach of your sword will become the sanctuary your will controls. Even the most primitive of accidental power discharges will not encroach on that." Playing with the crystal in the air, the man turned to the superpowereds in the doorway. His associates also passed Kusuhara and stopped a few steps in front of him.

"...Scepter 4!" The man in the black beanie flung his right hand sideways at the ranks. Five bright balls of light appeared in front of them and--

Ting! They were all sealed within cubic crystals without waiting a second for an explosion, and floated in a stack on the palm of the man in glasses. In that opening, the man in the brown hat attacked with his invisible blade. But, a woman in the blue uniform jumped out in front from behind the man in glasses, cutting into the blade's path and repelling it with the saber scabbard in her right hand.

She then held her scabbard at her waist and saluted him. "1315, transfer of authority in this incident as a Beta Case has been recognized by the Metropolitan

Police Department."

"Very well."

The man's finger met with the bridge of his glasses and he gave a faint smile. He then looked up and spoke as though he was chanting to the heavens--

We of Scepter 4 carry out duties of the sword.

Forgiving of neither war in the sanctuary, nor chaos in the world--

We will advance with sword in hand, for our cause is pure!

"Men, draw!" The uniformed woman waiting at the man's side commanded the other men.

They all drew their swords at once, and held them in front of them at the ready with the blade standing. A blue, wavering atmospheric distortion spread out in a circle from each of their feet. This must be the "sanctuary" that the man in glasses had mentioned earlier.

Kusuhara, too, had heard of their name in rumors. Created by superpowereds, the superpowered-response public security organization "Scepter 4" - this ground was already their territory.

The situation was already far from the hands of normal people. When Kusuhara tried follow Tamura, who was being carried off on a stretcher by the relief crew, the man called to stop him. "Ah, you. Please wait. I'd like to show you an example."

"An example...?"

The man in glasses moved his right hand lightly, and all six blue crystals flew into the air. As he unsheathed his saber he gave a single slice in an elegant motion, and with that one blow all the crystals were cut in two.

Boom!

Said simply, six times the energy of the bombs that had destroyed the vehicles earlier was released in one fell swoop, and engulfed Kusuhara and the Scepter 4 troops in explosive flame. No, the blue sanctuary created at the same time as the explosion from the feet of the man in glasses spread much larger and stronger than those of the other troops, and protected them all.

And still, the energy pushed to the boundary of sanctuary and normal space swirled up to the skies and concentrated overhead at a mechanical equilibrium point, pressurizing.

"...!" Kusuhara Takeru looked up and saw what was being born--a huge crystallization of concentrated space and energy.

It was a sword of bombs.

It was a symbol of a will suited for order, a symbol of a spontaneous discharge of power, and a symbol of an authority to control the world.

His nineteenth summer, the first time Kusuhara Takeru saw that--

The Blue King, Munakata Reisi, and his Sword of Damocles.

Chapter 1: Fencing Practice

In a corner of the Scepter 4 headquarters, nicknamed "The Camellia Gate," was a partially forgotten file room. The tens of file shelves lined up within the room were reminiscent of a walled maze, or cliffs exposed from layers of dirt. They were the rejected and heavy accumulated deposits of history.

Beyond this pressure and weaving through the rows of dusty shelves was a lone man at the single desk by the window. He was around his mid-thirties. His huge musculature was set, hunched slightly over an old computer. It was almost like he was a fossil buried in the layers of documents -- no, upon closer inspection, his hand was moving leisurely on the dirtied keyboard. His typing was slow, and sometimes stopped in hesitation. He used only the fingers on his right hand. This was because he had no left arm. The left sleeve of the internal affairs division uniform covering his massive body was knotted carelessly in the area above his elbow and dangled down.

The one-armed man shifted his reading glasses and massaged the bridge of his nose. There was a large, old scar that ran from the ridge of his nose to his left cheek. Rubbing that scar with his finger he made a stern expression, then gave a big sigh and turned to the monitor once again. He was no good at typing, and he was even worse at operating machines. His job of simply inputting the small amount of written reports into the computer once a day was the biggest task of his -- of Zenjoh Goki's[1] daily routine. When his rough right hand began to hover, searching for the key he wanted to hit--

A cherry blossom petal landed softly on the back of his hand. It was probably carried in on the spring wind from the rows of cherry trees planted on the outside of headquarters. As though being invited by the petal, he turned his gaze outside the open window.

On the grounds surrounded by trees, he could see a uniformed group forming a line. The pink of the flurry of falling cherry blossoms and the blue of the uniforms glowed vividly in the afternoon sun. The sight of the lined troops, their posture carrying a supple power, was a sight to behold. Part of that must have depended on the weight of the sabers worn on their waist. These swordsmen division troops were the core of the superpowered-response organization Scepter 4, but also could conceptually be called Scepter 4 itself. With swords at their waist, they were also the very "Sword of the King" itself. That was the foundation of their existence.

"Men, draw!"

The command, dominating the grounds and carrying all the way to the barracks, belonged to the lieutenant of Scepter 4, Awashima Seri. Though she was a woman, her dignified vigor completely controlled almost a hundred men. The troops all drew their sabers at once and held them in front at salute. The group of blades pointed to the sky looked like a pinholder from far away.

"Row formation!"

The troops pulled their sabers to their side and changed formation, from eight lines to four rows, with a trot. Space was kept between the rows while the troops were rather close to each other - the "wall" formation.

"Fencing method, first form! Begin!"

The troops moved their blades to the front and lunged.

"One!"

"Two!"

"Three!"

"Four!"

With each command, a hundred blades pointed in each direction, followed through and then once again pointed forward. Every single movement was completely synchronized.

The fencing method was Western swordsmanship arranged for group action and then simplified, but there were points that were definitely different from what is called "swordsmanship." The first is that they were not assuming that their enemy would have a sword like them. And right now, they were not aiming to cause damage with their sword.

The members of the swordsmen division all had high-level superpowers. Just with the inclination field that they created, they were able to repel bullets and knock down enemies several meters away. The sword as a weapon and swordsmanship were both essentially unnecessary.

Then... If it wasn't a weapon, what was it? What was a "sword" to them?

It was most likely something like a "symbol," or a "guide." Give a formless power the image of a sword, and then control it. Specifically, the drawing motion

was the trigger that released their power, then they concentrated on the image of a blade and used their powers with the movement of the sword. The sabers worn by the troops of Scepter 4 were the very symbol of "controlled power." The very ideal of the Blue King, Munakata Reisi.

"--Serrate formation!"

Every other member in each row advanced, or perhaps retreated, taking the shape of a jagged line.

"Fencing method, second form! Begin!"

The back row covered the gap created by the front row's attack. Then, the front row defended as they retreated, switching with the back row - almost one hundred troops were moving systematically and without hesitation, like a complicated machine made of cog wheels. They were beautiful movements, reminiscent of a group dance.

-- How dazzling.

The reason Zenjoh narrowed his eyes was not just because the reflection of the sun off the blades was bright. Like a hard, transparent mineral crystal, it was complete beauty that rejected all impurity. There was no room in there for such a foreign thing as himself.

That didn't mean he was unhappy. Much like his habit of touching his scar, it was just that realizing everything that he lacked with every little thing was something he'd been doing for many years. He rubbed his eyes, dazzled by the sight outside, and turned back to the monitor. Then--

"Hey, watch it!"

"Ah, I'm sorry!"

One member made a mistake in his movements, and seemed as though his blade had grazed another. Luckily, neither seemed to be injured, but--

"Kusuhara!"

"Yes ma'am!"

The one that lowered his head in apology, Kusuhara jumped up straight at Awashima's sharp voice.

"Ten laps!"

"Yes ma'am!" Kusuhara hurriedly put his saber back into its sheath and ran off.

"Watch yourself!"

"Yes sir!"

The member that got hit by the saber called out to Kusuhara as he passed, but--

"Hidaka, you too!"

"Wha!?"

Then, as the two troop members began to run side-by-side, still uniformed with sword at their side, "--Third form, from the top! Begin!" The lesson continued with Awashima's command.

It wasn't long before the two, ejected from the ranks, came around in front of Zenjoh along the inner edge of the grounds and happened to hear their

conversation.

"...Dammit, I don't get it... I wish that woman'd make her huge tits the joke, yeah?" Hidaka was taller and seemed to be older. He was speaking in a rude manner to Kusuhara at his side. "I'm a victim!"

"Huh? ...Ah, huh." Kusuhara, on the other hand, was smaller than average. His face also looked a bit like a boy's. "Isn't that where I say something like, 'you couldn't avoid it and that's slacking too?'"

"You're in no position to say that. Know your place!" Hidaka stuck out his elbow and poked Kusuhara's shoulder.

"Ah, ow, I'm sorry, that hurts... Wah!" Kusuhara raised his voice. His eyes met with Zenjoh's beyond the window, almost ten meters away.

"What are you making weird voices for?"

"Oh, there was someone... I heard that over there was storage, so..."

"Hah? There's at least someone in charge of it."

"No, I thought it was a monster."

"You a kid?"

"Ow!"

When Hidaka hit the back of Kusuhara's head, "Hidaka! Kusuhara! What are you fooling around for!?" Awashima's sharp voice interrupted them. "Five more laps!"

"Ueee!?" Hidaka made a strange sound and increased his pace.

"Ah... hello," Kusuvara stopped for a moment and gave Zenjoh a small bow, then once again followed after Hidaka. Zenjoh gave a wry smile as he nodded back, and watched as Kusuvara ran off.

A few minutes later when they came around the track again Kusuvara nodded his head to him, and on the next time around he passed without paying any mind to him. And then--

--Yet again, there are no more special notes from today.

Zenjoh finished typing up the brief report after a long time and when he lifted his head, Kusuvara and Hidaka were still running. They had at some point removed their uniforms and sabers and just had on their inner shirt. The other troops were nowhere to be seen. They had finished their scheduled lessons and seemed were already done for the day.

Neither of them were saying a word, and were now just mindlessly driving their bodies forward. A distant scene that reminded him of two animals running across a field. Zenjoh, gazing on this, was also mindless. As he caught a glimpse of a radiant time that he would no longer step foot in, his rough hand was just barely touching the scar on his cheek.

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"The point is, your tempo was off."

On their regular parting, Hidaka laughed and smacked Kusuvara on the back. Moody Hidaka was quick to anger, but it washed away just as quickly. "Think about what you did! Think about it!"

"Ah, I'm sorry. I will do just that." Kusuhsara, scratching the back of his head with a wry smile, actually thought that there might be something off about himself.

The one who would fail to sing together in a chorus, or the one who would somehow end up on the opposite leg in a march. Now that he thought about it, he was that kid. His athletics weren't bad, but qualities such as a sense of rhythm and precise movement were things he was born without. And though he had decided that he would never do work that involved singing or dancing, he had been careless about one last thing. There were marches and lines in the riot squad which he used to work in, and he was pulled from there and switched to Scepter 4, which also required group movement. Especially the fencing methods, where everyone wields actual drawn swords - if one messes up the timing, that could cause injury to coworkers in the area. It wasn't something one could get by with being bad at.

That was the reason why he thought about practicing on his own after lights out. Kusuhsara left the dorms in his tracksuit, and with a bamboo sword in place of his saber in hand, wandered around the premises of headquarters for a place he could swing it around to his heart's content. Inside a building he would probably hit a wall or a window, and in the middle of the grounds... would kind of make him stand out a lot. After he thought of several locations, he headed toward the dojo at the edge of headquarters. It was a rather normal association that if you use a bamboo sword, it's in a dojo.

If the dojo was open for night training, then he'd at least ask for a corner to

practice swinging. As he thought this, he went to the front of the building.

...But. For some reason, he got a strange feeling.

The lights of the dojo were off, but the entrance and windows were all wide open. Because of its old fashioned and open structure, the separations inside were few and the night air just entered. And, inside--

-- There's something scary in there, Kusuhara thought.

A savage beast that lurked in a dark brush, or a demon that lived in the attic of a deserted house - Kusuhara shook his head and chased out the images that appeared in his head. His instinct has always been sharp, but he didn't think there was any way a bear or a boar would be in the middle of the city, and he wasn't the age to be actually afraid of monsters. If something was actually there it was most likely human, and most logically a member of Scepter 4 like himself. Though he did wonder what they were doing with the lights off...

Kusuhara gave a slight peek through the door and into the dojo. Then,

Wham! --

The sudden blast of wind that blew from inside the dojo - no, something like the shock of a huge taiko drum being struck in front of him hit Kusuhara in the face. More precisely, it wasn't actual wind or sound at all. It was some sort of unseeable presence.

"...Who's there?" A low, calm man's voice asked him who he was, and he reflexively fixed his posture.

"H-Hello! Um...!" Ah Kusuhara became flustered, the owner of the voice

appeared from the darkness within the dojo. It was a huge man. He could tell from over his training uniform that his over-190 centimeter body was covered in bunches of thick muscle. He had his left hand in his pocket... no, it seemed as though that arm only went to the elbow. And in his right hand he held an unsheathed odachi, long enough to drag. It was an exposed, lethal weapon that radiated a dangerous aura incomparable to the regular sabers.

-- Is he going to kill me!?

Kusuhara reflexively pulled himself back and held his bamboo sword at the ready in front of him. A moment later, a faint blue light appeared on the part of the blade. A spectral phenomenon produced as a result of the inclination field. Since his appointment to Scepter 4 six months ago, his special powers had grown remarkably. By the connection of his power and the draw of his sword, a certain invocation and control became possible - like the other troops, he was taking lessons like that. To put it in Hidaka's words, "the beam swords you see in manga." The blue phosphorescent blade was pointed at the armed giant.

"Mm? ...Ah, no." The man, after observing Kusuhara, turned his back to him and once again made his way inside, picking up something long off the floor.

His eyes just getting used to the darkness, Kusuhara could tell that it was a huge sheath. The man held it under his left arm and put away the weapon with one hand, then took it back with his right hand and returned to him.

"Sorry for scaring you. I was practicing my iai."

"Ah, no..." Seeing the blade put away, he was finally able to relax. On a closer

look, the man's demeanor was rather proper. The large scar on his left cheek stood out, but the eyes behind the glasses were smiling softly.

"And you are?"

"Um... Kusuhara Takeru, Swordsmen Division Troops, Fourth Squad." Kusuhara relaxed his stance, and the blue light disappeared from the bamboo sword.

"The sword troops... Ahh, from this afternoon." The man scratched his left cheek with the back of the hand gripping the longsword.

"This afternoon...?" Kusuhara tilted his head, and the man gave his name.

"Zenjoh Goki. 'The person in charge of storage.' I'm not a monster."

"...Ah--" He was the person who had been watching them from the window in the barracks when they were running their punishment laps during the day's lesson. Kusuhara realized that person was the man in front of him, and he flushed. "...I see, and you're practicing on your own. Um... If I'm in your way, I'll come back later." Kusuhara said without explanation to Zenjoh, who had easily grasped the situation, half out of awkwardness. But--

"Nah. You have admirable intentions, Kusuhara-kun." The old scar cutting across his cheek moved, and he gave a half-smile.

Then--

First he asked if he needed light or not, but he could see his feet by the light from the window. Zenjoh himself had said that his senses were sharper in the dark. Then they took their places on practically opposite ends of the dojo and

started training on their own.

Imitating the sheathed saber, Kusuhara held the bamboo sword against his waist as in the fencing method. From the first form draw, he held it at the ready, followed through, and changed his feet - as he did so, he glanced over at Zenjoh.

He had said that since he was using a real sword it was dangerous and had put a large distance between them, but Zenjoh was sitting perfectly still, facing the small altar further inside the dojo, longsword placed at his side.

-- Still, that's an incredible sword.

Kusuhara recalled the sight of the naked odachi he had seen with his own eyes earlier. A thick blade holding a glittering light. Something that could probably cut even a human, vertically or horizontally, easily in two.

-- But something that big is probably hard to use.

-- And one-handed, even... How does he draw? I want to see that. Kusuhara had forgotten the reason he had come here in the first place, and his interest had already moved to Zenjoh.

-- Since he's practicing alone in the middle of the night that probably means he doesn't want others to see. I'll finish up here quickly, then peek in through the window...

"--Kusuhara-kun. Your focus is all over the place." Zenjoh said, his back still turned to Kusuhara.

"Eh...!? Ah, right, I'm sorry!" Kusuhara hurriedly fixed his posture and bowed.

Zenjoh continued to speak without laughing at or scolding him. "It's good that you're paying attention to your surroundings, but dropping your form for that isn't."

"Okay, I'll be more careful!" Kusuhara responded, posture still stiff.

"And... your beat is inconsistent."

"Hah... my beat?" Kusuhara tilted his head, "...Ah--"

And he realized.

-- This is that thing about "tempo."

"An 'inconsistent beat'... isn't good, right?" Kusuhara asked curiously, and Zenjoh's appearance wavered slightly.

"In this case, no... but it's right for swordsmanship."

-- Not good, but right.

They were words almost like a riddle, but to Kusuhara he felt they grasped the core of something.

"Um, do you think... you could explain a little more about that please?" When he involuntarily took a step towards Zenjoh--

Boom--!

With an attack that was like piercing his chest, the point of the huge sword was pointed at his throat.

"...!?" Kusuhara jumped back reflexively and gripped his bamboo sword.

But--

As before, they were on opposite sides of the dojo. They were apart by 30 or so meters. The point he had seen was an illusion his body created when he had felt the frightening energy. Zenjoh was on one knee, his longsword drawn. Kusuhara didn't see the moment when he had drawn it or how he did it at all. The blade that was the very extension of his single arm was filled with vigor, and his face looked like that of a terrible demon.

The tip of the demon was pointing to Kusuhara's throat-- no, to the doorway over his shoulder.

"My, what an impressive draw. It chills me."

He heard a smiling voice from behind him.

"Heheh... That's no good for a body just out of the bath. You'll probably get sick."

He turned around, and a tall man stepped lightly through the door. His image was a bit different, due to his yukata and just-washed hair, but--

"...Director?[2]"

"Good evening, Kusuhara-kun. It seems you were having quite the enjoyable conversation." The man said Kusuhara's name, but wasn't paying any mind to his existence.

The "Director" was the Blue King, Munakata Reisi. His eyes were fixated on the devilish swordsman who was pointing his blade at him.

Munakata pushed up his glasses with his finger, and gave a faint smile.
"Zenjoh the Demon,' fencing master--do you mind doing me a favor?"

†

-- I'm surrounded by scary people.

Kusuhara froze, bamboo sword still grasped in his hand. He couldn't make a single movement, much like he was being pressed on both sides by walls.

Munakata Reisi and Zenjoh Goki. They were both men with overwhelming presences, but their impressions were strikingly different.

Zenjoh's scariness - the oppressiveness of his bare weapon - was familiar in a way. The vigor of a fanged beast that a kendo master or a higher officer in the riot squad had. Something that fundamentally existed in that extension. Size, speed and strength from decades of simply training body and technique to the utmost. Like one would be eaten in one bite if they carelessly got too close - an easy to understand "scariness."

On the other hand, Munakata was unlike anyone Kusuhara knew. His age was most likely around 23 or 24. He could say his age was roughly the same as his own. He was too young to be the top of an organization that held more authority and combat strength than the regular police... That's what one would think looking at the number alone.

But those thoughts vanish when seeing Munakata himself.

Though Zenjoh's intent was pointed squarely at him, this man was not moving. He was even smiling faintly.

Another huge presence, directly facing a huge and explosive power. But this was more like an iceberg beneath the water, an unknown magnitude.

...Or rather, what showed the entirety of his power was probably that.

What Kusuhara once saw in the summer sky. A huge sword whose tip pointed to the ground, above Munakata's head, far above in the sky - The Sword of Damocles. Munakata was hiding that giant mass of energy within his deep, bottomless shadows. Though he seemed unarmed at first, he was more strongly equipped than anyone. So even if he was confronted with a sword, no, even perhaps attacked by a gun or missiles, he would most likely remain composed.

Zenjoh, his long blade unsheathed, and Munakata, hiding a huge "sword." Their confrontation lasted for tens of seconds in the strained atmosphere. ...No, it was most likely only a few seconds. That felt so much longer to nervous Kusuhara.

Finally,

"...You must be kidding."

Zenjoh relaxed his shoulders and let down his blade. Munakata didn't answer. He still had a faint smile on his lips. Zenjoh picked up his scabbard and sheathed his sword, then stood and approached. "Kusuhara-kun."

"Yes...!?" Kusuhara jumped aside to clear the way and Zenjoh passed slowly in front of him, like a large beast.

"Sorry. I said too much."

"Yes! ...Ah, I mean, not at all!"

Zenjoh bowed to Munakata who was standing in the doorway, then turned back to the entire dojo and bowed again, and just walked away. It felt as though the pressure inside the dojo lessened as the huge figure vanished from sight. But Kusuhara continued staring in the direction that Zenjoh left, still tense.

Because--

When Zenjoh left, Munakata's attention was directed at him. He felt that, and his entire body froze. Undoubtedly a frog being watched by a snake.

-- This has gotten even scarier.

What was Director Munakata thinking right now? How was he feeling? He had no idea. This unknowable, gigantic existence was peering at him from the corner of his vision.

"...There's no need to be so nervous, Kusuhara-kun."

"Y--... Huh? Ah--" Prompted by Munakata's actions he looked at his hands, and the blade of his bamboo sword was bathed in a blue light. His cautiousness had unconsciously shown itself. "Sir, my apologies!" Kusuhara stood at attention. He lowered the tip of his bamboo sword and the light on the blade quickly weakened, then disappeared.

Munakata gave a faint smile and gazed away from Kusuhara, looking toward the direction Zenjoh left. "It seems as though Mister Zenjoh hates us."

"Huh? Me too?" Kusuhara responded reflexively.

-- There shouldn't be a like or dislike to him when it comes to someone small like me.

That's what he thought, but--

Munakata's eyebrow moved slightly.

"...!" Kusuhara involuntarily straightened his back and looked away from Munakata. He was usually the type to just say what he was thinking. His for better or for worse, honest personality had never really caused any problems until now, but... only today seemed to be fatal. "Um... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

And again there was a long, scary silence when,

"...Hm." Munakata gave a small sigh. Unlike the sharp, calm smile he had been wearing before, it was one that surfaced from the depths of his body. "Apologies. It's as you say." As though it was a habit when he talked, he adjusted his glasses with his finger as he spoke. "That man hates me."

"...Hah." Kusuhara gave a vague response and peeked at Munakata. The expression partially hidden by his hand showed he was worried about the situation, or that he was ironically enjoying it. His gaze out the door and relaxed smile was much more human than before, but--

-- He really isn't someone I understand, after all... Kusuhara thought.

Finally--

"Please lock up." Munakata said and then also left the dojo, leaving Kusuhara alone.

Finally, he could practice calmly.

Within the empty space, dimly lit by the moonlight, Kusuhara repeated the standard motions two, three times.

Though the two giants had left, their impressions had left there some sort of a lingering scent. Even now he wondered, would a metal edge come flying out of the darkness? Or at this instant, would a cool gaze see straight through him? When he thought that, he felt something invisible go through his behavior. A bit of his tension rose through his feet, through his center of gravity and up his spine and lit his bamboo sword in a faint blue light, then radiated around him from the movements and watch at the end of it. In the dim light filled with potential dangers, Kusuhara almost mindlessly checked the range of his perception and weapon, and then--

His own breath.

The weight of the bamboo sword, the sound of it slicing the air.

His toenails brushing the floor, the feeling of it creaking as he stepped.

The dim light. The movement of the air. The sounds of the nighttime bugs.

All of that soaked into his body, or probably his own existence melted into the space around him. Only he was in this space right now. No, the space was him.

When he happened to look at his hands, the blue phosphorescence within his wooden sword was still spreading faintly. The floor at his feet, too, was giving off a faint ring of light.

"Ah... This is..." Kusuhara was bewildered, and then--

--If you hold on to your will strongly, everything within reach of your sword

will become the sanctuary your will controls--"

Those were the mysterious words that Munakata had once said. That he had recalled, with a feeling he couldn't put into words, he suddenly understood them.

-- Okay. Kusuhara took a deep breath and strengthened the grip on his bamboo sword. Then, he imagined transmitting that strength from his hands to the sword, then to the entire space of a strike. And then, on the floor, with Kusuhara in the center, a circle of light about two meters in radius appeared. The space his own will, the "invisible sword" controlled--

-- So this is that "sanctuary" thing...

Kusuhara continued the fencing methods with the sanctuary still spread. While the circle of light - no, even the half sphere of space above it was filled with Kusuhara's will, or rather was strengthening his own power, stabilized in that condition. The complete power he didn't used to have was stretching into the space beyond himself.

-- This is awesome.

He didn't think he was a strong person. He almost never thought about competing with others with power. But now, in this space, in this instant, he didn't feel as though he would lose no matter who he fought. No matter how strong his opponent was. No matter how strong their weapon was--

-- No, that's definitely saying too much.

For example, if he was up against Zenjoh's iai, he'd probably be cut down before he even had the chance to ready his weapon. Or if he was against

Munakata, he would probably be crushed along with his sanctuary. Of course, he felt the need to become stronger as a member of a fighting organization, but,

-- Well, I do have my limits.

Kusuhara let slip a single wry smile, and then with the movements of his technique worked on stabilizing his own small sanctuary.

However--

Kusuhara was now, by his own scale, putting himself with the men he had only vaguely recognized as giants until just a few minutes ago.

This is what it meant to have his own "sanctuary."

Kusuhara hadn't realized that truth yet. Right now he was just swinging his bamboo sword, creating small circles of light in the dimness--

The following day, lunch break. Kusuhara made his way to the old file room. He was going to return the dojo key.

There had been a key hanging by the side of the entrance, and after he had locked up he kept it for a night. And this morning, he went to the general affairs division before the beginning of work, but--

"Oh, this is Zenjoh-san's key." The clerk, a middle-aged woman, told him.

When he asked, he learned that in addition to the regular dojo key that this division kept, Zenjoh had his own copy. They made an exception and let him have it since he often trained at night.

"It's the, uh... Storage? File room? At the end of the first floor in the west building. Yeah, the one that's not being used... He's there during the day. Go give it to him."

"Ah, yes. Alright... Thank you."

-- So he's a part of internal affairs... Kusuhara thought as he nodded his head to the clerk.

Yesterday he had called himself "the person in charge of storage," but he had thought it was most certainly a joke he had made for the conversation.

In the fighting organization of Scepter 4, there were the combat troops that he was a part of, as well as the internal divisions that focused on support work. It was easy to tell what division someone belonged to with a single glance. One could say that their type was completely different. The fearless young people walking around with swords at their uniformed waists and chests puffed out were the former. The women and middle aged men who seemed more like regular citizens were the latter.

No matter how he looked at it, the man he had met yesterday looked like he belonged to this side - he seemed to have much more of a militant presence than a new recruit like himself. So then why was he in internal affairs?

-- It's probably because of his arm.

He lost an arm in a battle in the past and pulled back a line - that sort of thinking made sense. But--

Even if he was one-armed, he was so strong that he wouldn't lose even if he

was surrounded. No, his strength probably far surpassed even that of the top class of the sword troops, and was almost close enough to that of Director Munakata's.

-- Why was someone like him put in internal affairs? Maybe it has something to do with his will? Like, "I've had enough of this ruffianism!" Or something... But he was actually training... Well, that may have just been practice, but...

Those questions were tucked away in a corner of his mind during morning practice.

Then, when it came time for noon break, Kusuhara took the key from his locker and headed towards the file room in question.

Since he had seen him through the window yesterday he had a general idea of the location, but as they kept building onto the barracks there were some maze-like hallways, and he wandered around quite a bit in confusion. If he didn't finish fast, he might not be able to have lunch.

Finally, at the end of a dark hallway in need of repairs, Kusuhara knocked on a door marked by an old plate that had "file room" handwritten on it.

"Hello?" He called into the room and took a step back, bracing himself.

-- He's not going to suddenly cut me down or something, is he...?

After a while, the door opened, and Zenjoh poked his head out.

"...Come in."

-- Huh?

Body still braced, Kusuhara made a disappointed face.

-- Was he always this small?

No, he definitely wasn't small. The stature and breadth of this man's shoulders almost seemed like they would get caught in the door frame - a physique almost as large as a door. From a regular perspective, he was nothing but a giant.

But when he saw him last night, he definitely thought he was much bigger. His intimidating air was vivid in his memory. Even when he was sitting, it was almost as if he had to look up to see him...

-- No, no, that's not possible. That would almost be like a giant Buddha statue. Kusuhara shook his head lightly, correcting himself. Since he'd felt Zenjoh's drive last night while he was practicing in a relatively empty dojo, a "big" and "strong" impression had thoughtlessly engraved itself into his heart - that was probably what it was.

"Ah, you're... Kusuhara-kun, from yesterday."

"Yes. Kusuhara Takeru." Kusuhara straightened himself and bowed. Zenjoh gave a pleasant smile and bowed back, and he took out the key from his pocket. "Um... This is the dojo key. I was told to return this to you, Zenjoh-san."

Zenjoh-san.

He wasn't sure of his rank or work and wasn't sure what to call him, so he asked general affairs ahead of time. Formally, he's the "director" of the "general affairs division file room,"[1] but in Scepter 4 a "director" would mean Director Munakata. That gets complicated, so everyone just calls him Zenjoh-san without

the title.

But--

-- Nevermind people that know him already, I hope a newbie like me isn't offending him by suddenly being familiar with him and calling him "-san." Kusuhara thought, peeking a bit nervously at Zenjoh.

"Ah, thanks. Sorry for having you do this." As a half-smile appeared on his cheeks, Zenjoh held out his right hand. His palm was like a stone, with hardened, scraggy blisters.

-- Wow, what an incredible hand... He was unwittingly staring as he placed the key in his palm, and--

"It's dirty, huh?" Zenjoh gave a wry smile, putting the key away into his pocket.

"Ah, no, I'm sorry... Goodbye." Kusuhara bowed and turned to leave, but--

"Oh, Kusuhara-kun."

The voice from behind stopped him.

"Yes?" He turned around,

"...Kusuhara-kun, do you have a moment?"

†

"The computer's been acting up since this morning... I was wondering if you could take a look at it?" said Zenjoh, who seemed to somehow shrink a little.

"Hah, a... computer?"

"No?" Zenjoh became another size smaller. "Since you're young, I figured you'd be pretty good with machines, but..."

"No, I'm not that good, but ...a PC, right?"

Kusuhara scratched his head, but--

-- If he's acting this way... Then maybe I'm better for this than him, he thought. Even in the sword troops they had a lot of work that used computers, and he also had his own personal one, though it was cheap.

"I'll take a look... Where is it?"

"Yeah, thanks." Zenjoh relaxed his shoulders a little bit.

And then - the back of Zenjoh leading him, and the wall of lockers on both sides. These three things filling his vision, Kusuhara was led further into the file room. It actually only lasted a few seconds, but it felt terribly long to him. It seemed that whenever this person was in front of him, not only his sense of size, but his sense of time was warped, too.

Zenjoh suddenly stepped to the side, and the front of him grew bright. Next to the opened window was a single desk, buried under the piles of documents. But there was nothing that looked like a PC on the desk or even on the cabinets around it. When Kusuhara looked around, Zenjoh pointed to the top of the desk with his right hand.

"This is it..."

"Eh... This is the PC?"

What was in front of him differed greatly from the "PC" he had imagined. Basically it wasn't a thin, folding kind of laptop-- On top of a big, flat box-shaped CPU was a cathode-ray tube monitor almost the size of a small TV. And then, a full size corded keyboard. They both seemed to originally be a cream color, but were now sooted by the sun and heavy use.

"...Ah, one of these..." Kusuhara said without thinking, and Zenjoh responded with a gentle expression.

"Yeah. It seems to be pretty old..."

"...It's making some sort of weird noise."

"Yeah."

They held their breath and listened closely. The old computer CPU was making agitating boop boop, krrk krrk noises.

"It's been like this ever since I turned it on this morning. I can't do anything."

"Hah..."

A blurred line of white letters was displayed on black. Kusuhara drew his face closer to the monitor. "Umm... Ope...ra...tion?"

Then, Zenjoh turned around and, "...It says something like, 'Unable to find OS,' doesn't it?"

"I wonder what that is?"

"Eh?"

Now that he thought about it, he didn't really know. Looking up at the ceiling,

Kusuhara spoke. "Um... Some sort of really important thing that's in the computer's program... or something."

"Important, huh?"

"Yes... I think."

"And we're in trouble without it?"

"...Yes."

"Hm..." Zenjoh gave a stern look and scratched his chin. "...What should we do?"

They froze just like that, like statues. After an awkward two or three seconds passed--

"...Um, I can go get someone who might know."

"...Please." Zenjoh said without moving an inch, when--

"Heeee! Takeee! Takeruuu!" A loud voice interrupted them from outside the window. He saw a group of troops in blue gathering on the grounds. The voice belonged to Hidaka, who was waving both his saber and sheath over his head.

"The hell are you lazing around over there for? Afternoon lesson's starting!"

"Ah!! R-Right!" Kusuhara looked around in a flustered manner at the window, the monitor, then back to Zenjoh.

"...Sorry. Go on." Zenjoh said, and pointed to the huge window where he could exit directly onto the grounds, but... it seemed rather unreliable.

"Excuse me!" Kusuhara bowed his head and ran off, turning back to the

window.

"I'll come back after dismissal!"

†

Since he had missed out on lunch, afternoon practice was tough, but he somehow managed to finish alright. When they were cutting across the grounds bathed in dusk, the west building became a dark wall that blocked the setting sun.

The light wasn't on in the first floor general affairs file room. Zenjoh might have already left for the day.

-- Of course. He could've asked someone else, not me.

But upon closer inspection, the window facing the grounds was open. As he neared, he thought he might've gone home without locking up for the day like he did yesterday at the dojo, but--

--Wah! He's still there!" Kusuvara raised his voice.

In the dim room, Zenjoh sat unmoving at the desk by the window, staring at the PC making strange noises.

"Mm... Oh, Kusuvara-kun. You've come." Zenjoh lifted his head. It seemed that he'd been waiting for Kusuvara the entire time.

-- He should've called for someone else... It was hard to say that now, so he decided not to and--

"I'm sorry I'm late." Kushara nodded his head. "...Um, I've brought someone

who might know."

Two troop members stepped forward from behind him. First, a young man in glasses who had his long hair tied at the nape of his neck stood up straight and bowed.

"Enomoto Tatsuya, swordsmen division troops, fourth squad."

And then, "Same, Hidaka! Div four!" Hidaka gave a big wave of his hand over his head.

Then they entered the room through the window, and, "--Oohhh!?" When Enomoto, who had been calm up until this moment, saw the computer in question, he gave a shriek. "A P7... This is a PCRX-78! It's a machine from about twenty years ago. This is a legacy... No, this is a vintage now!"

Kusuhara flinched at Enomoto, who rushed to the CPU and watched it intimately, and Hidaka hit his back.

"Didn't I tell you? This guy's a nerd."

Enomoto pretended not to hear and stuck his head behind the monitor, and checked the wiring and model number. "Oh!! It's even a G3 type! The drive shaft on this has magnetic coating!"

"Uh huh... I see." Zenjoh responded, overwhelmed.

"I dunno man, whatever." Hidaka waved it off lightly. "...So? Can you fix it or not?"

Enomoto lifted his head. "Eh, fix...? Oh, this cranking sound? This is... look."

He operated a button and lever on the CPU, and pulled out a square board about the size of his palm. And then, the strange noises simply stopped. With a short electronic sound the PC restarted, and the startup processes began to be displayed on the screen.

"...You fixed it." Zenjoh murmured.

"Eh... What did you just do?" Kusuhara asked.

"This wasn't a malfunction or anything like that--" Enomoto answered with a smile and faced Zenjoh, waving the board he had just pulled out. "Zenjoh-san. Did you forget to take this floppy out?"

"Hm... Perhaps." Zenjoh nodded meekly.

"If you turn it on with a floppy in the A drive, the machine recognizes it as the startup disk and tries to bring up the OS. So if it's just a regular data disk, it'll keep looking for a nonexistent OS. Well, for machines from that time, it's a typical problem." Enomoto explained.

"Oh, I see. The OS, huh." Zenjoh nodded again. "I don't really understand, but... I thought it was completely broken."

"Yes, I'm glad it wasn't anything major."

When he said that, Kusuhara's stomach growled.

"Ah, I'm sorry..." He blushed, and Hidaka hit his back.

"Hahah, his stomach's been growling like crazy since noon! ...Eno! Hey, Eno! That's enough!"

"...Mm... Just a little longer." Enomoto gave a noncommittal response as he played with the PC, and Hidaka hit the back of his head.

"Let's go get food. Food!"

And--

"Ah, I haven't eaten lunch yet, either." Zenjoh slowly stepped further into the room. "If it's all right... I can go put on some soba."

"Ah... soba?" Kusuhara looked at Hidaka and Enomoto, and--

"Oh, yeah! That sounds great!"

Hidaka raised his hand up high.

†

It was unclear as to what it used to be used for, but there was a small kitchen in the general affairs file room. So Zenjoh wouldn't go to the cafeteria, but would often make simple meals here.

"I can really only boil water... But I like soba, so I make it a lot."

There wasn't a decent table in the room, and after putting the platter[2] of soba, condiments and Zenjoh's small cup on it, it was practically full. There weren't enough dishes, so Kusuhara and the others used soup bowls and mugs for the dipping sauce. Other than Zenjoh's proper chair, there was one folding chair. Hidaka snagged that one, and Kusuhara and Enomoto ate standing.

"Mm! It's good! This is really good! Is it high quality stuff?"

"Nah, it's stuff I got from the nearby grocery store..."

"I see, it's great!" he said lightly.

As he messily took soba from the platter, Enomoto said to him, "Hidaka... Restrain yourself."

"Idiot, the fastest gets the most. Take that!"

"Ah!"

Hidaka had already taken all his noodles, and Enomoto bowed his head to Zenjoh.

"I apologize, he was raised with brothers, and... I'm really sorry." He, for some reason, kept apologizing for Hidaka's behavior.

"I love spring onions. They're delicious." Hidaka filled his bowl with them, and vigorously slurped his soba.

As he watched the scene, Zenjoh's face relaxed slightly. "Yeah, today's spring onions are good."

"Today's...?" Kusuhara tilted his head, and with the wrist where he was holding his chopsticks, Zenjoh pointed to his left shoulder.

"It's because of this hand."

"...Ahh." Kusuhara understood. Since he couldn't use his left hand, Zenjoh couldn't cut spring onion in small pieces with a knife. Since Kusuhara had offered to help cut the onions, it was the first time in a long while that they actually seemed like condiments... or something like that.

"Do you want more soba?" Zenjoh stood.

"Oh, yeah please!"

"...Thank you."

Hidaka and Enomoto bowed their heads.

"And spring onions?"

"Yeah!"

Kusuhara followed after Zenjoh and headed to the kitchen with a jog.

Watching him, Hidaka sighed, "Hey Eno... he's cute, isn't he?"

"Gak!"

"Hey...! What are you choking for!? I don't mean anything weird!"

Enomoto coughed two, three times at the flustered Hidaka.

"Eh, what's wrong?" Kusuhara looked back.

"Nothing! Cut your onions!"

"Hah..." Kusuhara tilted his head, and with the heavy thud of a knife started to cut the spring onions again.

Enomoto's coughs finally turned into a smile. "Ahem... no, I know. I get you. Kusuhara-kun's like a little brother, or a puppy... He's charming."

--I see. Charming, is it?"

"Yeah, that's it! Charm! That's what I wanted to sa-- Woah!!" Hidaka turned around, and standing on the other side of the open window was Director Munakata Reisi. His almond-shaped eyes were directed towards the inside of the

room, and showed a hint of a smile.

"Hello, Zenjoh-san. Excuse me for interrupting again."

"Good afternoon!" Enomoto stood straight, still holding his chopsticks and bowl.

"Hey, Takeru! Make a seat! A seat!

"Eh, a seat? --Uwa!"

As the young troop members ran around in a fuss, Munakata entered the room through the window.

And finally--

Everyone holding their breath, they watched Munakata sitting in a chair in front of the second platter of soba, holding the dish they had prepared for him.

-- He eats soba... grocery store soba... Kusuhara thought this plainly ordinary thing was incredibly unexpected.

What was surprising was the image of Munakata normally eating a meal, which he couldn't imagine before. He felt as though this man didn't do things that regular people did, like eating or sleeping. He'd heard that he often did tea ceremony as a hobby, but for some reason thought he got his energy from ceremonial rites and meditation.

Of course, that was nothing more than just his imagination. However, looking at Munakata's demeanor now just strengthened that impression. His back was straightened naturally sitting in the chair. The way he used his chopsticks was

also correct, and beautiful. He didn't take too many or too few noodles, and with fluid movement dropped them into his small cup then brought them to his mouth. He barely made any noise. With soft slurping sounds and beautiful movements, the noodles disappeared like magic. It was an entirely different thing and entirely different movements from when they were making a ruckus as they ate their soba just moments earlier.

Not just Kusuhara, but Hidaka and Enomoto also stood perfectly still, staring at him.

Normal humans - no, normal animals should have a natural opposition to being watched during their defenseless moments of feeding. However, Munakata paid no mind to the gazes of the troops around him, calmly taking in the soba. It was even more like he was overwhelming those around him as he did so.

"--Is something the matter? The soba will spoil."

"Ah! Yes!"

"My apologies!"

Kusuhara and Enomoto responded at attention.

"Well... Thanks for the... soba." Hidaka reached out uncomfortably, and in obligation took two or three noodles with his chopsticks. Then, as though avoiding the awkward moment, swished them around in the sauce a few times then took his time putting them in his mouth. He made his best effort not to make any sound. Munakata watched his series of movements with a smile.

"Uh, um... It's very, cooked very well..." Hidaka fumbled out some strange-

sounding things, and then poked Enomoto in the ribs as he whispered into his ear, "Hey, Eno. You're next."

"What do you mean, next." They talked like they were pushing their turn for punishment onto each other. Actually, calmly eating soba while exposed to Munakata's gaze was an act of stress itself.

Enomoto, bewildered, glanced back at Kusuhara.

-- Eh, me!? He unwittingly gave a small shake of his head, and Enomoto made a face of despair.

"Heh... Shall we decide the order with rock, paper, scissors?"[3]

"No! We're sorry!"

As the three stood together at attention, Zenjoh passed slowly in front of them. In his hand he had a porcelain bowl filled with sauce. It seemed to be the replacement for the small soba cup he had been using earlier, which he had washed and gave to Munakata.

"Pardon..."

Zenjoh placed the porcelain bowl on the desk, and with a creak he sat in the folding chair in front of Munakata. He then grasped some noodles with his hands from the platter and casually placed them in his bowl. He sprinkled some spring onions on it with his hands again, then took his chopsticks and began to slurp the soba vigorously.

Since he couldn't hold the bowl with his left hand, he lowered his face close to it, eating like a dog. It wasn't something about manners or anything, but in his

behavior there was a strange dignity, like the actions of a large beast. "He looked like a tiger eating soba..." Hidaka had expressed later.

Almost an entire handful of noodles disappeared into Zenjoh with just two mouthfuls. Kusuhara and the others were speechless, and he again took noodles from the platter then quickly ate it up.

"Heheh... what a good way to eat. You've fascinated me." Munakata smiled.

"You belong in a painting."

"How embarrassing... The vulgarity stains me."

After finishing the platter in a blink, Zenjoh stood again. "...Shall I make tea, too?"

"I'll have tea. But it's no use to try and chase me out."

Zenjoh's movements stopped, and Kusuhara and the others held their breath. Munakata spoke, giving an enigmatic smile.

"Zenjoh-san... Today I'll have not just soba, but a favor of yours."

Chapter 2: Dojo Training

Tokyo Legal Affairs Bureau, Family Register Section, Fourth Annex.

The Blue King Munakata Reisi's official position was the director of this small office at the bottom of the polity, whose business was "the collection and management of information regarding persons retaining abilities caused by a unique phenomenon."

The combat organization of Scepter 4, made up of nearly a hundred uniquely powered individuals, was a strictly non-public organization. Officially, it was an outside agency commissioned for a part of the Fourth Annex's business, and at the same time it should be said that it was the private army of the Fourth Annex's director, Munakata Reisi. Be that as it may, in actuality the members of Scepter 4 and the Fourth Annex were practically one and the same. Basically, the "Fourth Annex" was a paper identity given to Scepter 4, who kept the extra-legal side of things. But Munakata normally calls himself "director," and his subordinates also called him by this title through and through. It was a display of power more immense and transcendent than anyone else, while showing deference towards the existing social system - there was no way for outside people to understand such a truth.

He was a man like a chimera, Zenjoh thought.

In front of him, the man like a chimera smiled like a chimera.

A smile that steals one's freedom.

†

Once a week during the day in the dojo, along with the squads, or those who willingly choose to participate in martial arts training, occurs a joint training that all troops participate in. Unlike fencing practice, which was for learning the armed group movements, dojo training was designed for the mastery of each and every person's swordsmanship technique itself. During practice, they wear dogi[1] and use bamboo swords. They use techniques prohibited in competitive kendo, and use them mercilessly. Protective gear is unused. They etch into themselves the agility to evade an attacking enemy along with countless bruises.

Saturday afternoon, just before joint training. Roughly a hundred troops sat properly in neat rows. Much like during fencing practice, the lieutenant, Awashima Seri stood facing them, commanding them.

No - today at Awashima's side was an unfamiliar man. A single-armed man wearing a dogi on his huge muscular body, enshrined like an old tree. He emanated a strange presence just by being there, without saying a single word.

"...Hey, who's that crazy lookin' guy?"

"Mm, I wonder..."

Troops from the fourth squad, Fuse and Gotoh, whispered to each other.

"Heheheh, I know..." Hidaka slid over from diagonally behind them, sticking his head in. "He's the soba guy."

"The hell is that?"

Fuse and Gotoh gave him a questioning look, and beside him Enomoto smiled

wryly. "He's something of an old vet. It seems he was moved to internal affairs after an injury..."

"Huh... a battle-whatevered warrior. Well, doesn't look like a wimp just from looking at him."

"No, he's actually a surprisingly nice guy--"

--Silence!"

A sharp voice rang throughout the dojo, and Hidaka and the others hurriedly fixed their posture.

"This is Mister Zenjoh Goki, who will be advising our dojo training from today." Awashima bowed as she introduced him, and Zenjoh lowered his head in return, facing the troops again.

"Hello."

The troops gave Zenjoh their full attention, expecting some sort of speech to begin, but Zenjoh didn't say anything else; he looked around the room and bowed his head again.

"Mister Zenjoh was a part of the former Scepter 4 organization and participated in actual battle. He is incredibly experienced. Do not disrespect him."

"Ma'am!"

Awashima wrapped up the greetings, the troops gave a single bow, and training finally begun. After several easy forms and light practice swings, and

the formation of lines and such, Awashima ordered, "Scrimmage!"

Scrimmage was a kind of so-called free-style practice, but it presupposed a melee situation in actual combat, and as every person changed opponents one after another they moved freely, fighting each other. It was dangerous training, where training swords and other's bodies may hit blind spots beside and behind, in addition to a proper opponent.

Feet rubbing the floor, striking training swords, the troops' shouts - the dojo in scrimmage showed a state of chaos. But upon closer inspection, within that chaos existed different characteristics and a kind of chaotic order. For example, Awashima walked along the walls without participating in the scrimmage, shouting commands such as,

"Ishizuka! You're too defensive! Hit back!"

"Jinnai! You are too sloppy!" Bringing together the whole atmosphere.

And Akiyama, Benzai, Camo, Domyoji - the space around the four squad commanders was rather open, showing their skill and air of intimidation, and those around them continued to challenge them.

And then, one more--

Fourth squad, Kusuhara Takeru.

His body was small and his skills were nothing to fear, but for some reason there was space around him and others were avoiding him. It's because he was "hard to approach." As though he himself was more aware than before, Kusuhara would often strangely delay his breaths between blows and his timing, and

moved at a moment that his opponent wasn't expecting. He'd catch his enemies off guard by his own reflexes - "awkward" would be an easier way to express it. For example, were this a conversation with bad verbal responses, or when two people speak up at the same time converted into sword training, you have practice swords and bodies bumping into each other. Everyone understood that Kusuhara himself had no ill intent, and scrimmage training was aimed at those exact irregular situations in the first place. It was just that "going up against him's a pain" - those feelings manifested themselves as a strange feeling of distance around him.

On the other hand, there were those who liked that quality of his.

"Kusuhara!" Hidaka called from an area far from him, the point of his bamboo sword pointing to him.

"Yes!" Kusuhara answered by readying himself.

They edged slowly towards each other, feinted each other, when finally Hidaka's sword suddenly lowered.

"Yaa!"

"Ha!"

Hidaka managed to preemptively strike him on the abdomen as Kusuhara came at him without waiting. Since they weren't wearing any armor, his attack hit him directly in the gut.

"Agh...!" Kusuhara doubled over with the wind knocked out of him. But he stepped to stop himself from falling to his knees.

"Alriiight! One more!"

"Ach... Okay...!"

Kusuhara somehow managed to ready himself without being able to breathe, so Hidaka dropped his stance, resting his weapon on his shoulder and smiled, "...Haha, you can take a breath."

But--

--Hidaka! Don't lose focus!"

"Egh!"

Awashima scolded him and he shrank.

Watching the scene from a distance, Gotoh gave a low laugh. "Heheheh... Hidaka likes Kusuhara, doesn't he."

"Yeah, the new one... I like him too," Fuse answered, striking back at him. Fuse, Hidaka and the others, the problem children of the fourth squad, were proficient in pretending to exchange blows while they took breaks and chatted behind Awashima and the other squad commanders' backs.

"He really gets tricked by feints. It's funny 'cuz it's like a puppy playing around."

-- "Puppy" is probably too much. Enomoto overheard their conversation and smiled wryly, but he then remembered, Ah... That's right, I just called him a puppy, too. He wasn't one to talk.

Then,

"...Oh hey, how's our famous pro doing?"

"Uh? I dunno..."

Enomoto also unwittingly looked back into the dojo as they said that. The single-armed man Zenjoh was sitting the same way as he was at the beginning of training, without moving an inch.

"...You think he's sleeping?"

"Heheh, maybe... Oh. Awashima-san's going to wake him up."

Just as they said that, Awashima, having made practically her third loop around the dojo, spoke to him. "Zenjoh-san... How is it?"

It was as though he was listening to the sounds of the training, and he lifted his head.

"Hm... It's wonderful that everyone is so full of spirit." It was a harmless answer.

Then Awashima sat on her knees directly in front of Zenjoh. Her unshaken bearing was much like a direct attack to the head. "I've heard from the Director that you worked closely with the previous Blue King in the former Scepter 4."

"Ah... That's an old story."

"No one has been able to match you in swordsmanship."

"Not at all." Zenjoh shifted the position of his glasses uncomfortably. "Director Munakata is giving me too much credit... No, it must be a bad joke of his."

"There's no need to be modest. Please do give guidance."

"Ah, that's..." Zenjoh scratched his head in bewilderment at Awashima's pressing attitude.

At some point the troops around them had stopped moving too, watching the two exuding an unusual air. It wasn't as though Awashima had said something with hidden meaning. They were simply thinking, if Director Munakata had said that this man here was strong then he must be, and that if he was told to teach then he should.

"Heh... Pro's embarrassed."

"That's 'cuz Seri-chan doesn't get the hint."

Gotoh and Fuse whispered to each other in hushed voices. There was a soft murmur throughout the dojo of the similar conversations occurring here and there.

"...How about it?" When Awashima began to ask to be doubly sure--

--Um... Lieutenant Awashima! One match please!" Kusuhara stepped in front, clutching his training sword.

"Oh? Saving the day, huh."

"He sure got guts."

"You can call that 'way too conceited,' too."

As the troops spoke to each other, Awashima stood and faced Kusuhara with her weapon readied. "Alright, let's go."

"Okay! Ya--!"

-- Smack!

The moment Kusuhara raised his sword over his head to strike, the tip of Awashima's moved slightly. Kusuhara's body stiffened for just a moment in response to her movement. She took the chance to step directly towards him, connecting at his forehead - that was all half a second. He fell on his behind right where he was. He seemed to have gotten a slight concussion, and his head was spinning. Low sounds of "ooh..." stirred from the other troops. Despite Awashima's clear hit, Fuse said with a wry smile, "There's no one else who could lose so beautifully."

"Dumbass, I was gonna decide that, Kusuhara!" Hidaka said, poking Fuse in the side.

"Kusuhara, can you get up? ...Seems not. Then, you there. Carry him to the corner." Within the hesitant, low laughs, Awashima quickly ordered Kusuhara and the troops around him, and she once again sat in front of Zenjoh.

"...How about it?" It was a continuation of the earlier conversation. It was almost as if she wasn't even aware of her face-off with Kusuhara.

"...Well, you know. That'll be..." When Zenjoh started to stand, clearly hesitant about it--

The loud, screeching sounds of the sirens set in the dojo walls went off. It was the signal of an all-troop emergency dispatch.

†

Awashima instinctively stood and turned back, then made a bow to Zenjoh

who nodded to her silently, and gave orders to the nervous troops. "Men, gather at the exit in full uniform! First and second squads will depart first and receive information support and briefing during transport. Third and fourth squads stay in battle-ready standby until further orders!"

"Ma'am!"

The troops exited quickly from the dojo like pouring water.

"Ah..." Kusuhara hurriedly tried to stand, but Hidaka kept hold of his shoulder.

"Lieutenant, what about Kusuhara!?" Hidaka raised his head and asked.

"He'll rest there!" Awashima's voice grew faint as she answered.

"...Yeah. You chill here for today."

"Ah... Okay."

Hidaka patted Kusuhara's shoulder and followed the other troops out.

For a little while afterwards, Kusuhara lay on the floor in the corner of the dojo, staring blankly up at the ceiling. It wasn't that long of a time. When he finally came back to his senses, he could still hear the hurried voices of roll call and vehicle guidance from the front. It just felt as though that clamorous energy had escaped to outside the dojo. The space just moments ago was filled with a hundred troops striking at each other like fireworks, and was now just like an empty bowl. Only two remained now in this empty bowl. Kusuhara himself, and Zenjoh.

Pulling a sword stand with a caster, Zenjoh picked up one by one the bamboo training swords the troops had tossed to the ground.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I can take care of that." Kusuhara tried to stand, but Zenjoh stopped him with his hand.

"Rest for a little more."

"Ah... okay. I'm sorry." Kusuhara sat with his back against the wall. His head was still spinning a little.

"...I'm the one that should be sorry. I had you looking out for me." What Zenjoh was talking about was Kusuhara's earlier match with Awashima. When he'd seen Zenjoh's trouble he'd interfered without thinking, but --

"No, that was unnecessary. There didn't seem to be much point in it."

"Hm..." Answering vaguely, he finished collecting the swords and began to mop the floor. He was probably used to cleaning the dojo. He fixed the long stick between his right hand and underarm, moving the mop skillfully with one hand.

"...Zenjoh-san?"

"Hm?"

"...I don't have any talent, do I?"

"Hm..." Zenjoh stopped and rubbed his chin with his right hand. Then, without answering Kusuhara's question, he began to mop again.

-- Is he smiling...? He gazed blankly at Zenjoh, then listening to the noises from the front, he brushed his bangs. That's mean-- Oh... His finger touched a

large bump that had formed on his forehead.

†

They said that the emergency dispatch during the day was one to deal with an incident of assault somewhere within the city. So to speak, it sounded like "a hundred security force troops were mobilized for one quarrel," but since one person of the concerned party was a Beta Class superpowered, "The monster appeared, so we send the army, or something," Hidaka had said when they returned.

"When it becomes a so-called Beta Case, then it's something like, will Director Munakata himself appear, or will they dispatch all of us like they did today?" Enomoto joined the explanation, and Hidaka continued.

"And the guys today were taken in by Lieutenant Awashima, Commander Akiyama and Commander Benzai and those guys. So basically only they really got to do anything."

"No, the numbers were necessary. Working with the police to secure the perimeter and such... But I don't think we needed a hundred. And us fourth squad and Commander Domyoji sort of stood out in the front, and the rear was clattering some."

"The 'strong guys' and the 'responsible guys' have to be separate."

"Well, the organization of Scepter 4 exists because of those 'strong guys'... Originally, the squad units with the commanders' strength as the center were meant for dealing with Common Class superpowereds, but if the opponent's a

Beta Class, there'll be a lot of irregularities..."

"And aren't Beta Classes in the first place... supposed to be one in a hundred? So why are they appearing like every week when we don't even know if there's even a hundred of them in the entire country? Is this the year for them or what?"

"That's a mystery," Enomoto nodded.

"It looks like we don't know what the cause of it was today... Anyway, we have to deal with it."

"...So, that's that reorganization, right?" Kusuhara interjected.

-- Several days prior, the "Soba Day."

Munakata, who had come to visit Zenjoh, spoke of a plan to rearrange the swordsmen troops and the entire organization of Scepter 4 into an assumed Beta Class-response system. In order to make possible a quick response to Beta Class superpowereds who appear suddenly, he would place a selected unit comprised of troops who excel in special skills and fighting prowess at a higher rank above the regular sword division, concentrating on information and authority. Conversely, this was removing strong squad-class personnel from the position of "subordinate leadership" and granting them individual mobility.

"...More specifically, the squad commanders of squads one through four, as well as those who excel in their individual skills, in addition to a small number from the intelligence division... I plan to place this unit comprised of roughly fifteen men in total directly beneath me."

"Huh..." Why was he speaking of such a thing to him?

Munakata said to Zenjoh, who wore a dubious expression on his face, "Zenjoh-san. I would like to hear your opinions as consultation on who to choose." So for that, Munakata had ordered Zenjoh to make appearances at the midday training under the name of "adviser" but...

--So basically, if we show that old guy our cool moves, then that means we'll be promoted to the elite corps. Hey, this's our chance!" Hidaka smacked Kusuhara's back.

"I don't think it's that simple... But a chance is a chance," Enomoto smiled wryly.

"...But I showed that chance some pretty uncool things, though," Kusuhara said dejectedly. Hidaka grabbed and held his head under his arm, swinging him around roughly.

"Dumbass, they're gonna evaluate those guts of yours! You've got the potential! Be more confident, confident!"

"T-Thank you! But owww, don't hit me! Please don't hit me!!"

Though being left behind with a concussion certainly had its effect on him, Kusuhara headed calmly to the dojo with training sword in hand. It wasn't that he'd completely accepted Hidaka's backup, but he may have been tougher than he thought.

If luck was on his side, he may be able to see Zenjoh as he trained. He had spaced out during the day, but if he asked properly he may be able to get some

sort of advice. If anything, he'd just practice swinging.

The dojo building looked hazy in the night air. It was dark and dead silent with a dreadful air, like the other day.

-- Ah... Zenjoh-san's here. Kusuhara just continued walking. He planned to call out to him when he'd gotten just close enough so that he wouldn't suddenly jump out and cut him.

Then he saw someone in a state of undress in the hallway that reached from the southern building. It was Director Munakata. Though he was still not visible from the dojo, the presence emanating from within the dojo turned into something even more on edge in response to either Munakata's footsteps, or a presence even stranger.

Kusuhara hurriedly veered away from the path. He took his time going around the back of the dojo, walking quietly, and peeked in through the window. Zenjoh was in the center of the dojo. He was sitting the same way he had during training in the daytime, but, maybe due to the long sword at his side, he seemed much more tense. And across the dojo from Kusuhara on the other side, on the step of the large, open window sat Munakata. His back was to Zenjoh and Kusuhara. The atmosphere wasn't as awkward as it was the other day, but it was too much to say it was friendly. Kusuhara hesitated as to whether or not he should say something to them.

"...How was the training today?" Munakata asked, looking towards the inner garden.

"Ah... Their enthusiasm has affected me," Zenjoh answered, still facing inside the dojo.

"Heh... You say things an old man would say."

"I am old."

"...Well, we'll leave it at that, then."

"Huh..." Zenjoh's tone was completely hard in response to Munakata's almost calm words to himself. That body sitting upright seemed as though it would burst forth in the next moment to cut Munakata's back. On the contrary, it was bizarre that Munakata was easily fending off such vigor that could cause anyone to hold their breath simply by looking.

"May I hear what I've asked of you?"

-- Ah, this is...

It was the personnel selection talks. Kusuhara took a deep breath and listened carefully.

"First... Awashima-kun. How is she?"

After a few hesitant beats, "This is my personal opinion, but," Zenjoh began as he spoke. "She has mature, good swordsmanship. She is the perfect example for the troops."

"Hm." Munakata nodded slightly. His expression was not visible. "Well then, the commanders beneath her... How about, Akiyama?"

"He is also strong. His balance is good next to Awashima's. He would be

promising in an important position."

"Benzai."

"He's rather mild-tempered, but steady. He would be good for defense."

"Camo."

"His entrances are a bit much. You have to make sure he doesn't run ahead, but this is where he'll be of most use."

"Domyoji."

"He has strong habits, but it would be most beneficial to not hold them back."

"...I see." Munakata nodded again. "Any others of note?"

"Hidaka, Gotoh, Fuse, Enomoto... Was placing all the eccentric ones in Domyoji's squad an intentional arrangement?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Basically, hoodlums of a sort..."

Munakata let escape a small breath. He seemed to have laughed. "Well, it's something like a toy box. Is there a problem?"

"No... It would be best if everyone were to be a bit more serious, but they have room to grow."

Afterwards, Zenjoh gave a few names with brief reviews. Then,

"...How about him?" Munakata said suddenly.

"Him...?" Zenjoh tilted his head slightly. "Ahh, you mean Kusuhara Takeru."

-- !? Not expecting to hear his name, Kusuhara held his breath. He heard his heart beat a few times as it grew louder.

After a rather long pause, "...He's interesting." Zenjoh said.

"Interesting?"

"Yes."

"...Heh." Munakata's shoulders shook as he laughed, and he suddenly turned around. "...Is what he says, Kusuhara-kun."

"Huh... Ah!" Kusuhara straightened his back from his peeking position and bowed. "I-I'm sorry!"

Two, three seconds of an awkward silence passed,

"My."

Zenjoh was at the other side of Munakata's line of sight. He was still facing the inside of the dojo, but at a closer look the tension in his shoulders was gone, and he was rubbing his chin with his right hand.

"This is new... The demon is laughing."

"I'm not a demon. I laugh and cry."

"...Then I would surely like to see you crying someday."

Zenjoh's hand stopped. His expression was unreadable.

"Apologies. That was a joke... Thank you for your opinions. I'll consider it." Munakata said and stood. He waved his hand slightly to the other two and walked off.

As the sounds of sandaled footsteps grew distant, Zenjoh finally took his sword in his hand and stood. "I'm going, too," he said to Kusuhara with a small smile. "I'm a bit exhausted mentally... I always get nervous when I talk with him."

"Ah, yes. Um... Thanks for your hard work."

"Lock up after yourself." He pointed to the key hanging on the side of the entrance, then left the dojo.

And then, Kusuhara, now left alone, stood in the center of the dojo and began to practice his forms and swings, but just couldn't get into it. After a little while, he swung his bamboo sword in his gloomy state, and he suddenly realized he'd forgotten to ask -- What does "interesting" mean?

†

The reorganization wasn't long after that, and was put into effect on May 1st. Each member of the swordsmen division were gathered in the hall of a government office, and Scepter 4 lieutenant Awashima Seri handed each person an official notification of appointment.

"Akiyama Himori."

"Ma'am."

"As of today, you are appointed to the swordsmen division special duty corps."

"Ma'am." Akiyama took the notice and gave a single bow, turned back and returned to the front of the first squad's line. However, once the ceremony was over, he would leave the first squad and become a member of the new "special

duty corps."

"Next, Benzai Yujiroh."

"Ma'am." Taking Akiyama's place, Benzai stepped out from the front of the second squad line.

"Likewise, you are appointed to the special duty corps."

"Ma'am."

"Next, Camo Ryuho--"

--First the four squad commanders, namely Akiyama, Benzai, Camo, Domyoji, in addition to a few others from each of the squads were listed off and told of their selection in the special duty corps. The fourth squad's Hidaka, Gotoh, Fuse, and Enomoto were included in that. Then, in each squad, one commander and four leaders were appointed from the remaining troops. Over all, a little less than half of the troops had a change in status, and the remaining half were to remain as is.

Then, lastly--

"Kusuhara Takeru."

"What? ...Ma'am!?" He'd thought this had nothing to do with him, but when his name was called when he hadn't been expecting it, Kusuhara hurriedly jumped out to the front of the line. Awashima nodded lightly to Kusuhara, who stood at attention, and read off his appointment notice.

"As of today, you are appointed to the general affairs file room."

"General affairs file room"--

-- ...That's where Zenjoh-san is, isn't it. Why me? What do they want me to do there? Kusuhara, back in line and standing up straight, mulled over the thoughts that were spinning in his head.

--Concluded. Everyone must gather in their new affiliations after this and discuss what's forthcoming. You are dismissed." Awashima's words of conclusion barely reached anybody's ears.

Which is when,

"Wait, waaait!" Kusuhara was suddenly grabbed on the upper arm by Hidaka, who forcefully pulled him.

"Huh? Wh-wha--!?" Hidaka held a confused Kusuhara's head under his arm and marched forward violently, then took Kusuhara's notice of appointment from his hand and slammed it down on the table in front of Awashima.

"What on earth does this mean!?"

The other swordsmen troops, who'd just been dismissed, stopped in their tracks and turned back at the menacing attitude.

"Pardon?" Awashima knitted her brows, tilting her head. It was a hard, cold expression, the "mask of ice" acquaintances and troops tease her for. But it was only today that Hidaka didn't back down.

"I mean! Why's only he get put somewhere else!? This is a demotion or whatever, isn't it!"

"Why do you think so?"

"Whaddya mean why...!?" Hidaka hesitated. Because he was the type to talk a whole lot, he wasn't very good at answering questions "...Well, he's made a mess of a lotta things lately... And he even couldn't go out to work the other day..." He looked away, faltering in his speech. "But, just because of that...!"

Awashima sighed quietly. "Hidaka. It seems you're upset, so I will explain the situation to you myself." Her tone was calm and rather courteous. She didn't seem mad. "First, this reorganization was for business efficiency within the entire organization, not for ranking troops and much less individual discipline."

"...Urgh."

Awashima remonstrated him slowly, and Hidaka fell silent again.

"Second, like the other troops, Kusuhara is someone who's had his talents discovered and appointed directly by Director Munakata. You should also think of this assignment as a part of the Director's planned most efficient human deployment."

"...What, but..."

"Third--" Awashima's expression changed slightly. It was without the mask, and rather pensive. "There is something I also don't understand about Kusuhara's treatment."

"Then...!" Hidaka leaned forward, but Awashima's expression tightened once again, unapproachable, and she spoke.

"...However. This is all according to the Director's plans. It is not something

we can put a word in on. That is all for an official explanation." Then, as to make doubly sure, Awashima spoke as she stared fixedly at Hidaka's eyes. "If you absolutely must, then if I were you, I would ask the Director directly."

"Eh...!?" Hidaka held his breath for a moment, and, looking away, spoke. "... There's no way I could do something like that."

"Then this conversation is over."

"Ugh..." Hidaka tensed, and behind him,

"You did great! You did really great, Hidaka. Up against that scary Awashima!"

"The Director's even scarier, though."

The former members of the fourth squad whispered to each other, but when Awashima glanced up, they simultaneously held their tongues and fixed their posture. Awashima gave a disgusted-sounding sigh, and this time faced Kusuhara. "Kusuhara. Do you have any remarks?"

"No, none in particular." Kusuhara fixed his posture and answered, and Awashima nodded.

"Then, this situation may be a bit hard to swallow, but please work to your utmost in your new position."

"Yes... But, um."

"What is it?"

Kusuhara said to her, who had tilted her head, "Would it be alright... if I asked the Director directly about his reasons?"

"Hey!? What are you saying!?" Hidaka hit Kusuhara's back.

Behind him,

"Man, he's fearless."

"Could it be, he's at his rebellious phase...? Heheh."

"The hell is that?"

As Fuse and Gotoh whispered to each other, "Shh, she'll get mad at you again." Enomoto hurriedly stopped them.

"Uh... Well, okay." On the other hand, Awashima gave a vague response, a dumbfounded expression on her face.

"Well then..."

†

When Kusuhara told Lieutenant Awashima that he would ask, it wasn't to make fun of her. It wasn't quite "confidence," but something like a vague aim.

That night, the dojo.

-- Could it be, today too... He thought, and when he'd headed over, they were indeed there.

Zenjoh and Director Munakata. As usual they were not face-to-face, sitting in their usual spots keeping an odd, tense air about them. It wasn't as though they were going to chat, nor was it an open, "just being together is enough" type of

atmosphere. Even still, they came to the dojo almost every night, creating this tense situation.

-- I don't really get it, but they're both pretty eager... He thought dully as he neared.

"Ah, Kusuhara-kun." As usual, Director Munakata called out to him from a distance. Rather, he probably had noticed him much earlier, and just waited until he'd been close enough to hear.

And then--

"Heheh... So that's what Hidaka-kun said... He's a hot-blooded man." When Kusuhara spoke of what happened during the day, Munakata chuckled. Zenjoh, possibly listening to the conversation, faced the side, completely silent, like he was the other day. "So, Kusuhara-kun. What is your question?"

"Huh?"

"Haven't you come to ask me my reason for being unfair?"

"No, it's not unfair... If it is a demotion, then it can't be helped. I've only caused problems for my seniors in the corps..."

"Hm." Munakata, without confirming or denying it, made a vague remark.

"But that's... not the reason, right?"

"...Oh?" Munakata looked at Kusuhara's face, his interest piqued slightly.

"Director, you seem to be really interested in the file-- no, in Zenjoh-san... I just thought that... Maybe putting me there probably has special meaning or

something."

"...Hm." Munakata once again made a vague remark and suddenly turned to Zenjoh. "Zenjoh-san, Kusuahara-kun says as such... But do you think the same?"

Zenjoh didn't answer. Keeping his sitting posture, he simply glared with a scowl on his face at the floor a few meters in front of him.

"Well... Your face says, 'what are you plotting?'" Munakata gave a slight smile. "How frightening. I may be eaten."

At his provoking tone, Zenjoh finally began to speak slowly. "...No, not a plot... I just find it hard to judge your intentions." His gaze still didn't move. He was still trying to outstare the dojo floor. "...At least to me, there is no reason to think it good to downgrade a young man with a future to a do-nothing job."

"Of course not." Munakata responded readily. "I want of course young men with futures, as well as seasoned veterans to display that power in a suitable place. That's what I think."

Zenjoh stirred slightly.

"Heheh... Your face says, 'this has been unnecessary trouble,' Zenjoh-san." Munakata's smile grew bigger. "The old file room is where you'd transition until you'd adjusted to the new Scepter 4. That was the promise, but... You sure seem to like that dark place." Munakata paused momentarily, waiting for Zenjoh's response. But it never came. "Zenjoh-san, as I'm sure you are aware, Scepter 4 is an unofficial organization, but its purpose of existence is very public. Social paradigms originally manage and control those with unusual powers who do not

even obey the laws of physics... Were it not for our work, just keeping the structure of this country would be dangerous." And Zenjoh still did not speak. Munakata continued, "...And, at the same time. I think of the present Scepter 4 as mine--no, as myself. All the information, authority, facilities, and even each and every member that Scepter 4 has should all be one system that moves beneath my will."

Zenjoh brought his brows together slightly. What was reflected in his eyes was either surprise at Munakata's audacious self-confidence, or suspicion at his self-righteousness.

"And so... The system's black box is a part of me as well as something that is out of my control. That is you, Zenjoh-san."

"Hah... My apologies."

"However, it would nevertheless be a waste to omit it. Your 'Demon Fang'... I want it to be of use to Scepter 4 under any circumstances."

Zenjoh answered Munakata's words without facing him at all. "What an overestimation."

"And you are much too humble. No, it's better to call it self-effacement." Munakata said with a provocative tone, but Zenjoh was unresponsive. "Still, I can't force you to obey me. And were I to remove your fangs and tame you, you would no longer be a demon. Heheh... This is quite the problem." Munakata was smiling, clearly enjoying himself, when he suddenly turned to face Kusuhara. "Kusuhara-kun. How do you feel about this situation?"

"Huh?"

He spoke to Kusuhara, who unwittingly straightened his posture. "I'm distressed. Zenjoh-san is also distressed. And I'm sure you have your own worries. So every person here right now is distressed."

"Uh, that's... Yes, I am."

Munakata let slip a chuckle. "But there is where the interests of all three people here coincide. Give-and-take, you could say."

"Yeah..." Not quite understanding, Kusuhara responded vaguely. Zenjoh also wore a puzzled look on his face.

"Ah, it seems I've been indirect. Then I'll get straight to the point." Munakata faced Zenjoh directly. "Zenjoh-san, I want you to leave the blood of the demon in my Scepter 4."

"Blood...?" Kusuhara tilted his head, and Zenjoh also knitted his brows. "...I don't quite understand what you mean."

He was probably expecting an answer like that. Munakata spoke calmly. "Basically, what I mean is that since you still continue to refuse to participate in the combat troops, I want you to pass on your skills to Kusuhara here in your place."

"Nah... I don't have anything like 'skills' on me."

"Of course, your techniques are not the kind that can be taught evenly to a line of students." Munakata said lightly. "And that's where Kusuhara-kun comes in."

"What?"

"I'll have Kusuhara move with Zenjoh, and steal those skills as he is able for the time being. Well, it's like special training."

"Uh, Um..." Kusuhara looked around as though trying to ascertain the situation, then once again faced Munakata. "...Are you telling me to become like Zenjoh-san...?"

Munakata gave a small smile. "Not quite. However, I would be happy if you were to inherit some kind of element. Yes, an element that works beyond even my expectations in my Scepter 4." Then he and Kusuhara looked to Zenjoh. "I feel there is some value in trying it out... What do you think Zenjoh-san?"

"Make Kusuhara my replacement... huh." Zenjoh frowned, and Munakata smiled delightfully.

"Heheh... You seem unwilling. You're not the kind of person to force the work you hate on a young person and be okay with it. However, what if not I, but the person in question were to ask that of you?" Munakata glanced at Kusuhara. "How about it, Kusuhara-kun? The opportunity to be mentored directly by Zenjoh Goki is a rare one."

"Hah..." Directing his gaze diagonally upwards, Kusuhara tried to picture it. Zenjoh's ghastly bearing, and a tremendous draw that could slice an enemy in half by spirit alone--

Now, he was being made into some sort of pretense of Director Munakata's expectations. That he knew. But depending on the circumstances, were he able to

feel a part of Zenjoh's power--

"Um... Zenjoh-san?" Kusuhara stood up straight, and facing Zenjoh he asked directly, "...I ask you too, would you please?"

He then waited for Zenjoh to answer... but he didn't. He first looked to Kusuhara, then Munakata, then stood slowly and headed for the entrance.

"Ah..."

Kusuhara watched him leave and Munakata, beside him, laughed. "Heheh... You got through to him, Kusuhara-kun."

"Huh...?"

"Were I to ask, it would not have gone like that. I'd expected no less from you."

"What... hah." Looking back and forth between the exit that Zenjoh disappeared from and Munakata who was smiling beside him, and asked, "Um... What were you expecting from me?"

"Well, that is..." Munakata brought his hand to his glasses and chuckled. "... Your charm, I suppose."

"...Huh?" Giving a slow-witted response, Kusuhara scratched his head.

Chapter 3: Disciple of the Demon

-- I was born to meet this man.

Like many of those who gather beneath Kings, Zenjoh also thought as such when he once met the Blue King.

Habari Jin.

The leader of the superpowered-response organization Scepter 4 who protects the citizens' peace - the Blue King. His actions were without hesitation or error and were always quick and precise. His character was noble-minded yet open-hearted. He was a man like a stroke of the sword, who could easily reach the heavens. And because of that, Zenjoh also thought that he too should be by his side as a stroke of the sword.

"I'm lucky," he once said to Habari. "Knowing exactly what you have to do in this world is hard, but... I am just here to protect you. It's so easy." But, "No, Zenjoh," Habari had said. "What you are to protect is not me."

"Hm? Then, what is it?" When Zenjoh asked back, Habari looked up to the summer clouds and responded.

"Our justice."

"Hm...?" Zenjoh thought for a moment, and spoke. "It's the same to me. My justice is, basically, you."

"No, you're wrong."

“I don’t get it.”

“Don’t try to understand with your head.”

“What, are you trying to call me stupid?”

“Of course, I don’t think you’re clever.” Zenjoh was not very eloquent, and Habari was not one to use decorative words. The other troops often laughed and called their conversations, “naked Q&A.” “It’s not your head or your words. What I mean is that I believe in your strength.” Habari turned back to Zenjoh.

“There’s only one thing you can do, what you should do.”

“...Basically, this.” Zenjoh tapped the scabbard of his sword attached to his waist. Habari nodded, “One who does not fail when the time to do so comes. That’s who the man Zenjoh Goki is.”

“...I see.” Zenjoh looked at the sword on his waist, Habari’s face, and then up to the clouds in the sky. He felt as though his fate was connected to something bigger through his sword. “Well, then that’s probably right.”

Zenjoh was satisfied. Everything was simple, clear, and everything shone. And--

--That’s right. That’s good enough.” Habari’s bright, smiling expression as he said so still remains in his memory.

With a single smile burned into Zenjoh’s heart, Habari Jin, the Blue King, disappeared from this world.

199X, July.

The Red King, Kagutsu Genji's Sword of Damocles went out of control, and failed. Along with it an area centered around southern Kanto with a diameter of roughly a hundred kilometers was completely annihilated. Along with seven hundred thousand civilians, the Blue King and his subordinate Scepter 4 were caught in a torrent of destructive energy. The largest Damocles Down in recorded history - the Kagutsu Incident.[1]

From that day on, a scar that looked like the earth had been scooped out remained on maps of this country.

That also might be the gaping hole in Zenjoh's chest. He lived on, having lost an arm and carrying a hollow heart.

Afterwards, in a world where both the Blue and Red Kings were lost at the same time, incidents of rampaging uniquely powered people increased. The superpowered-response organization Scepter 4 continued to exist without a center. But--

Zenjoh left Scepter 4 and retired from the world in seclusion

-- "What you must protect is our justice."

He had no doubts about Habari Jin's last wish. But he didn't think finding and rounding up active superpowereds one after another was that "justice." The justice he was looking for wasn't in Scepter 4, and there wasn't someone he was willing to follow either.

No longer drawn, his blade continued to rot in rust. He thought of it as himself.

And then, over ten years passed, and his doorbell rang.

He opened the door to his one-man apartment and unconsciously held his breath.

In front of him stood the late Habari, just as he remembered him.

No - it wasn't. That man wasn't Habari. At a closer look, it wasn't even possible to say that they looked similar. However, they certainly had underlying similarities. The man carried a sword at the hip of his blue uniform. He did not seem a day past twenty, but there wasn't a single hint of fear in his gaze looking up to veteran Zenjoh. It was a strange self-confidence that was more than simple fearlessness. It was though he had some sort of conviction in his destiny.

“Zenjoh Goki-san, correct?”

Zenjoh stood in a daze, and the man introduced himself.

“Hello, my name is Munakata Reisi.”

“Please... come in.”

In his ten years of isolation his dislike of people only grew worse, but that man, Munakata had a presence he couldn't ignore. Zenjoh prepared some tea, and they sat facing each other on the tatami floor.

“My apologies for intruding so suddenly.”

“Nah...” Zenjoh raised his right hand to stop Munakata as he bowed. He had no phone or communication lines installed, and owned no sort of mobile terminals. All communication was only monitored by government liaisons. But even if a meeting was requested through a liaison, he would most likely refuse. Munakata had virtually no choice but to visit him directly in order to meet him.

“Your... What is that uniform?” Zenjoh asked.

“I’m not quite used to it yet, but,” Munakata smiled lightly, touching the collar of his blue uniform. “It’s Scepter 4’s. I’ve changed the design a bit.” Zenjoh’s expression stirred, and Munakata nodded. “I have succeeded the organization Scepter 4 - the positions and authority. First, I’ve come in greeting.”

“...Which means?”

“I am the present Blue King.”

-- I knew it.

The unusual “Kings,” who held unparalleled power and commanded those with supernatural abilities. They are not chosen by elections within their organizations, nor are ordered by someone of a higher standing. It’s said that they are one day suddenly “called” by an existence that is the Slate. Much like Habari Jin had once been, Munakata Reisi was also suddenly awakened, became the Blue King, and came into control over Scepter 4.

“What about the troops?”

Scepter 4 had continued activities as a King-less Clan for these ten years, but an incident in the previous year caused activities to cease and was now disbanded.

Munakata answered Zenjoh’s question calmly, “I have chosen all the members of the new Scepter 4.”

“Ah... I see.”

It would have been a lie if he said he hadn't thought that treatment meant his old companions were now useless. But at the same time, he thought, That might be for the better.

The duty of an unusual King is not to try to guess the feelings of his subordinates. He must himself lead and accomplish great tasks that no other could accomplish. The new Blue King will create a new organization and work as he wishes. He had no right to speak as someone who'd been removed from the scene. All he had to do now was answer Munakata, who had come to go through the proper motions with him as a person of the former organization, with the utmost courtesy.

"...I see," Zenjoh said again, and bowed deeply. "I will be praying for the growth of the new Scepter 4."

When he spoke, it felt as though something within him was ending. He even thought, however stupid of an image it may be, that the departed Habari Jin had taken the form of the young man in front of him to tell him, "Now rest." But, "Ah, I don't need such respects. I've come to get you," Munakata said, and smiled.

"...!" When Zenjoh saw that smile, his whole body tensed. He felt a shock run through his bones.

-- No.

The man in front of him most certainly had something in common with Habari Jin. That was most likely the right of a King. That was no mistake. However--

--However, this man was clearly different from Habari Jin.

"Heheh, what a frightening spirit... It just makes me want to make it my own even more. The Blue King Habari Jin's right hand man, called the strongest swordsman... Zenjoh the Demon." Munakata looked closer at the menacing Zenjoh, but did not flinch, and instead his smile grew wider. It was a bottomless, deep smile that could see straight into the depths of another's heart all while hiding its own true intentions.

Zenjoh's right hand subconsciously looked for the sheath of his sword. His entire body wanted the blade that had not been worn at his side for a long time.

-- "What you must protect is our justice."

For these ten years, those words were his belief - no, his entire existence. There was no hesitation in his feelings.

-- But, this man--

Was this man named Munakata Reisi a King who would make justice in his own way? Or was he something else, someone even more mysterious?

He couldn't tell anymore.

For the protection of Habari Jin's, and his, justice.

†

--Zenjoh-san, Zenjoh-san."

"Mm... Ahh."

His shoulders shook, and his eyes opened. It seemed as though he'd dozed off

at his desk.

It was a bit dark around him, and the western sun filtered through the hallway-side window beyond the file lockers. He looked up to the clock on the wall, and it was over 50 minutes past his end time.

“I’m sorry for waking you. You seemed to be having a nightmare, so...”

“Ah.” He answered Kusuhara with a vague noise and rubbed the inner corner of his eye. “...I was dreaming of something from long ago.” Maybe he’d been slacking recently, but he had started napping more.

Kusuhara, without criticizing him, held out an open laptop. “Um... Can you check the daily report?”

The laptop was something they’d managed to get in negotiating with General Affairs. According to Enomoto, who was present for that, it’s “a machine that’s two or three years old, but it’s much more efficient than this one here.” And with that, the other old computer hadn’t been touched since.

Kusuhara’s daily reports were much more detailed than the ones Zenjoh had intended to write, and all cleaning and filing done during the day was recorded along with the procedure and remarks for each. It wasn’t that Zenjoh had told him to do it; not only did he find his own work to do, he also suggested some things such as, “Let’s create digital copies of all the old important documents and put them on the server.” The last line read “Zenjoh, review,” and Zenjoh would add two letters so that it would say, “Zenjoh, reviewed.” At first, he wrote “I have reviewed it. Zenjoh.” in place of a stamp, but writing just that much was

rather time-consuming for him, so Kusuhara had the sense to use the method of typing just two letters.

In the beginning, Zenjoh thought Kusuhara was a childish, somewhat dumb young man, but working with him he felt, in all respects, the quick-wittedness and frankness of the youngsters nowadays. He thought he was much more thoughtful than himself.

“Good work. I don’t mind if you head on home now...” Zenjoh said formally as he handed the laptop back to Kusuhara.

But Kusuhara answered with a charming smile, “No, we’re just getting started.”

It had been over a week since the personnel reassignment. On the night of the appointment ceremony, Munakata had personally instructed Kusuhara to “accompany Zenjoh regularly, and watch his every single move.” He was to burn it all into his memory and make it his own, not only the work during the day, but everything from training at nighttime to how he acted during the day. To Zenjoh, it was “surveillance” that would be like something forced on him by the government in the era of isolation - no, it was much more uninhibited than that, but Kusuhara’s carefree smile slipped into his mind and made him unable to find his will to refuse.

Kusuhara was staring with respect and interest at Zenjoh, who was still a bit sluggish, unable to shake the lingering feeling of sleep. He was almost like a dog waiting by his master’s side, waiting for orders.

He was nothing like a master. Zenjoh looked away, embarrassed.

“...Shall we start dinner?”

“Yeah.”

As they tried out working in the kitchen, Zenjoh started to naturally work around Kusuhara. Opening bags of ingredients and wringing out cloth was hard to do with one hand. Zenjoh had gotten used to life with one arm in these past ten years, but watching Kusuhara had him realize how handicapped he was. On the other hand, it also seemed that Kusuhara was interested in the way he pushed and pulled the knife, and how he handled other cookware.

“It’s like, you know... You season the egg with snaps, and you move it like, like...”

“Like?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t really know how to say it... But it’s useful.”

As they chatted, a loud voice carried in from the window facing the field.

“Yooo!”

“We’re here for the soba!”

Hidaka, Enomoto, Fuse and Gotoh. These four former members of the fourth squad, and current members of the special corps, visited the old file room from time to time. They’d also have training rotations and times they’d have emergency dispatches, but this was their third visit since last week. Hidaka brought out a table for meetings and folding chairs from storage, and everyone

brought their own utensils to eat with, so the front of the old file room was starting to look like a cafeteria.

“Kusuharaaa! Boil that baby up! I brought my own share,” he pulled out dried noodles he’d bought at the convenience store.

“Uhh, actually you kinda look pretty shameless,” Fuse laughed.

“Heheh, I brought fried fish and veggies I got at the cafeteria,” Gotoh pulled a plastic pack from a plastic bag.

“Ooh, good one, Gottie!”

“Well, if you’re gonna go that far... Why didn’t you just eat soba in the cafeteria?”

“Hey, you’re so strict, Eno!”

“I’m so sorry we’re always so noisy...” Enomoto, who kept control of the group, bowed his head to Zenjoh.

“Nah... Glad you’re lively,” Zenjoh answered.

Hidaka bringing his friends along was most likely to make sure they wouldn’t feel disconnected. Everyone was truly worried about where Kusuvara was headed.

And so Hidaka talked to Kusuvara about what was going on.

It’s said that there’s an emergency dispatch about twice a week, and they need time to rest--

“Basically, we’re short on help! You gotta hurry up and join us!” Hidaka said,

splashing soba sauce everywhere.

“Well, I would really like to do that.” Kusuhara scratched his head. And then, “Heheh, you’re being so modest... I get it, Kusuhara-kun, what’s gonna happen is the Pro’s gonna train you, then your level’s gonna shoot up, yeah?”

“A crash course!”

Gotoh and Fuse both spoke up.

“Oh man, that means he’s expecting a lot outta you!” Hidaka exclaimed excitedly.

“But...” Enomoto said, thinking, “I wonder what the conditions for success... Or I mean, more specifically, what does he have to do in order to level up?”

“Y’know...” Hidaka spoke. “Like, normally, you get full proficiency. That right, Zenjoh-san?”

“Mm...” Zenjoh let slip an indiscernible sound.

“Well, that’s...” Instead, Kusuhara answered. “Director Munakata told me that I’d pass if I beat Lieutenant Awashima in a match.”

“Wha...?”

The noisy four suddenly grew silent.

“Um, that’s a bit...”

“...Hard, don’t you think?”

Enomoto and Gotoh both said.

“Y’sure the Director isn’t bullying you?” Fuse commented.

“Um... I dunno,” Kusuhara replied ambiguously.

The table was like a light that went out, and the only sound was of Zenjoh slurping his soba.

†

It was true that the “Awashima wall” was thick.

Even during that week’s joint practice--

“Lieutenant! One match please!”

“Alright, come!”

When Kusuhara called out to Awashima and she answered, all the troops turned to face them. All the troops already knew about the “assignment” that Director Munakata gave to Kusuhara. In addition to the rumors that Hidaka and the others spread, Awashima had most likely been told directly by Munakata.

In the middle of the circle the troops made,

“Here I go! Yaa--!”

Whaam!

Much like the other day, Awashima’s head strike was a clear hit to Kusuhara’s forehead as he stepped forward. Though he didn’t get a concussion, he stayed at the edge of practice and rested that day.

And even during the next week’s joint practice--

“Here I go! Ya--!”

Wham!

“Owww...” Kusuhara gingerly touched his head.

“Man.”

“He’s no good.”

As the surrounding troops laughed scornfully, Awashima’s head suddenly tilted, and she looked at her bamboo sword.

“...What’s wrong, Lieutenant?” Enomoto asked.

“Well... My strike was off the mark.” She swung lightly once, twice, then tilted her head again.

And then, the week after that--

“Lieutenant!” As Kusuhara called out to her, the sound of snickers immediately surrounded him.

“Hey, don’t laugh!” Hidaka yelled, and they fell silent.

“Alright, come.” Awashima, at the ready, was neither smiling nor scowling. Much like her straight posture, her expression was unshaken and calm.

“Here I go! Ya--!”

“Hm!”

As Kusuhara stepped forward, Awashima changed her head-strike stance in a simple moment, turning over her bamboo sword, and hit him on the side.

“Gouh...!” Kusuhara, suddenly struck on the side of his stomach, crouched

right then and there. Awashima looked down at him, her expression doubtful, and then turned back to Zenjoh. Silently, he gave a slight nod.

“Lieutenant, what about Kusuhara?”

When Fuse called out to her, she came back to herself. “Carry him to the corner.”

“Ma’am!”

Hidaka rushed over, leaning Kusuhara on his shoulder, and said, “Man, you’re hopeless!”

That night, when he arrived late to his night training, Zenjoh and Munakata were already in the dojo. As always, Zenjoh sat inside while Munakata sat at the window, facing away from each other, but when Kusuhara entered, the tension eased.

The reason Kusuhara was late was because he had gone to get a personal item of Munakata’s that was being kept in the old file room. It was a small but heavy cloth bag, similar to a sandbag. The contents were a custom-made, 10,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. Completed, it took up the space of two whole tatami.[1]

“I can’t really spread out large things in my office.”

And so for that reason, he left it in the old file room during the day and had Kusuhara bring it to the dojo at night. Kusuhara took out and lined up a few put-together pieces in a corner of the room, and placed the remaining separated pieces in a pile on the floor next to it. The design was “a blue sky.” Attached to

the instruction booklet inside the bag was a picture of the completed picture, which was a cloudless, blue sky.

“It’s ready.”

“Thank you.”

Once the normal preparation was done, Munakata switched places with Kusuhara and continued the puzzle. First, he carefully adjusted the placement of the completed pieces, then took a handfull of pieces from the pile, picked out one and carefully observed it with narrowed eyes. Then, slowly, he placed it in one place on the floor. Sometimes, he would place a piece together with one he’d placed down earlier and they would fit together perfectly, but for the most part pieces were left placed individually on the floor. Basically... Munakata wasn’t putting them in place by trial and error, but in one go. Piece by piece -- he was putting the pieces down on the floor using an invisible guideline.

Kusuhara wasn’t particularly versed in puzzles, but he thought as he watched Munakata crouched on the floor, There isn’t anyone else who does it like that.

“There’s nothing strange about this, Kusuhara-kun,” Munakata spoke, continuing to work. “If the edge of the piece is cut in a straight line, then it’s a piece on the edge of the puzzle. If there’s a part of an eye or nose on the piece, then it’s a piece that belongs on a face. Or, if there’s part of a letter on it, then it must belong on a book or sign. Besides that, there are countless other bits of information - the size of the piece itself, the shape, the cut pattern, arrangement, the ink on the front, the indentations on the back - that you can logically make up for.”

“Huh...”

“If you look at the parts, you can see the whole... That is all.”

-- So basically, he already sees the completed picture from the beginning, Kusuhara thought. It most likely didn't just apply to puzzles. The structure within Scepter 4 as well as in other societies, and what sort of actions he should take such places that had to do with him... He understood all things like that on a level beyond anyone else. It was though the entire world sat on the palm of his hand...

-- He is scary.

What Kusuhara thought as “scary” wasn't his impression towards Munakata's sharp intellect. He had tenacity that, though he already knew the “completed image,” he didn't lose interest in the puzzle, would lead him to spend tens of hours on a 10,000 piece puzzle with his own hands. What Kusuhara found scary was his sense of finding the fun in “knowingly acting.”

-- If I made an enemy out of him...

Having his destiny decades in the future seen right though, then made off with and to be chased knowingly into the abyss of destruction... Kusuhara's body shivered lightly as he imagined that.

“Am I that frightening?” Munakata said, without looking up.

“Hu-- What!?” Suddenly called out, Kusuhara stood at attention. And, “...Yes. ...A little,” he said.

“An honest one, you are.” There was slight laughter in Munakata's voice. “To

be fearful of those different from you is a normal human emotion... I'm also afraid of people like you, and like Zenjoh-san."

"Uh..." I understand Zenjoh-san, but, "...Me too?"

"Yes. So please, scare me more." Munakata looked up, and pointed his eyes towards the inside of the dojo.

"Huh? Oh... Yes." Kusuhara hurriedly left Munakata's side and took his place roughly in the middle of the two, and began his training.

Kusuhara's training used the fencing method as a base. When he was first appointed as Zenjoh's "disciple," he expected to be taught his style of draw and other techniques, but he refused - "Nah... My style's not something I learned from someone else. And it's not something I can teach others." It wasn't of a "something-style" system, but apparently just his own technique, mastered. Therefore, Zenjoh's advice to him was, "You, too, should forge your own style."

So what Kusuhara thought was, "Let's try the fencing method like how Zenjoh-san would do it."

He would first recall what he observed of Zenjoh's bearing during the day. All he could ever remember was the incredible draw with exploding power, but his regular movements were, rather, calm and slow. Like a large carnivore carrying his weight gracefully, one movement led to the next, and to the next. As he kept that in mind as he worked through the method, his movements changed from ambiguous pauses from commands to something like an aimlessly spinning dance. He thought it was something like old people practicing tai chi in a park.

He understood something while he did that.

He had conflicting impressions of Zenjoh's "explosive draw" and "slow movements," but they probably should be thought of as one and the same. They were movements, basically, for "a full-power attack at any moment." In the normal fencing method, after the swing of the sword and the hold of the position, there was a space of a single breath before the next movement. An enemy attack in that space would even seal the "demon draw" of the beastly instinct in the same moment. And so, slow movements would eliminate that space.

As such, the man named Zenjoh Goki moved so that in the next moment he would be able to unleash his most powerful attack - in battle, in training, and even in daily life.

When he realized that, he felt a shiver shoot up his back.

-- Zenjoh-san is incredible.

And,

-- Alright, me too...

Keeping Zenjoh in mind, he adopted those movements as his own. In these past few weeks, those movements were turning into something that only belonged to him, different from both the regular fencing method and Zenjoh's actions.

...And today, regulating his posture and breathing, he repeated his "Kusuhara-style Fencing Method" over and over. He at first felt Zenjoh's and Munakata's presence, but eventually even forgot about those, and went from the first form to

the second, to the third - when he'd finished all five forms, and came back down, Munakata's voice came from behind him.

"--Kusuhara-kun. How is your match with Awashima-kun going?"

"Huh?" He was suddenly pulled back into reality from a state of no-mindedness in practice."Um... This week was no good, either."

"I see," Munakata said, examining the piece he had in his hand. "...Though I've heard you've gotten to quite a good place."

"Ah... I wonder."

"However, you lack spirit... Or rather, it seems you've taken comfort in this place."

"Ah."

"...Zenjoh-san?" When Munakata called out suddenly to him, Zenjoh's body stirred. "Don't you think it's about time to let Kusuhara-kun go?"

"Uh..." Zenjoh answered vaguely, and Munakata continued talking.

"Well then, let's decide a deadline - one more week."

"Uh... What?" Kusuhara responded with a cry.

"The joint training next week will be your last chance. If you don't hit Awashima-kun with your training sword at your next faceoff, Kusuhara-kun, I will advise you quit on the grounds that you are unfit as a member of Scepter 4," Munakata condemned, a slight smile on his face.

“Pardon my intrusion. Please put away my puzzle,” Munakata said, and left the dojo.

Kusuhara stood standing and staring, his words seemingly not reaching his ears, and he finally murmured, “One more week.”

Defeat Lieutenant Awashima in one more week.

What should he do? What could he do to beat her? Nothing came to mind. Now that he thought about it, it wasn’t that he’d done anything these past three weeks. All he did was randomly imitate Zenjoh. When Munakata had said, “You don’t have enough spirit,” it was probably true. Spending his days at Zenjoh’s side wasn’t unpleasant. He’d sort of thought that it wouldn’t be so bad if he were to continue his daily routine like this.

It was though cold water had been poured over him. Though he had been told to “defeat the Lieutenant,” he had done nothing to accomplish that. His punishment for his indolence had just been handed down to him.

“Um... What should I do...?” he asked Zenjoh nervously.

“Hm.” Zenjoh took his sword in his hand and stood up. It was already time to stop for the night. “Continue as usual.”

“Ah... okay.”

It probably meant “This has nothing to do with me,” but when Zenjoh said it, he calmed. There was no point in getting worked up about it now. All he could do now was do what he could, little by little. Kusuhara took the basic stance of the fencing method. And--

Like a looming black wall before him, Zenjoh stood in front of him.

“Continue.”

“...Yes.” Kusuhara began the method that he had arranged. The tension he felt in front of Zenjoh’s huge presence was well-sharpened in his swordsmanship.

One, two, three, four - in the breaths between the slow movements of the training sword, Zenjoh suddenly stuck his sheath in.

“!?”

For a moment, he thought he was going to disarm him, but Zenjoh’s sheath touched Kusuhara’s shoulder, without impeding his movements, and supported him. And then, his sword moved faster than normal, and the connection between movements changed a little. They were faster, more smooth...

“Huh...”

“Keep going,” Zenjoh said again, and Kusuhara nodded.

One movement, another movement. Kusuhara swung his sword, and changed his steps. Again, Zenjoh changed his own form to match Kusuhara’s movements while correcting them. There was no space for him to stop and stand or take a breath. Before he knew it, Kusuhara became drenched in sweat, and a few droplets fell to the floor.

As he continued his quick-paced training with all his might, the five styles and the 40 forms of the fencing method changed, fused, and were once again broken down.

That day's evening training continued until sunrise, and it continued the next day, and the day after that, only broken up in between by work during the day.

That was when Hidaka and the others paid a visit to the old file room.

"Yo, we're here for the so-- Hey, where's Kusuhara?" Hidaka looked around, and found Kusuhara asleep on the hard floor, still in his uniform. "Hey, what're we gonna do with you?" he said, somehow happily. Then, "If you need something from him, I'll relay the message..." Zenjoh said.

"Nah, we just came to see him!" Hidaka gave a casual bow and turned on his heel.

"Um... Zenjoh-san, thanks for taking care of Kusuhara."

"Yeah, thanks."

Enomoto and Fuse both lowered their heads, and behind them,

"...I brought shrimp tempura!"

"Hey... Man, that's not what we're talking about at all!" Hidaka teased Gotoh.

...And then, the last night before the joint practice.

With Zenjoh's support, Kusuhara'd gone through the fencing method countless times, and he'd sweated so much all over that his dogi practically clung to his body. But his strength and vitality had mysteriously recharged, and his senses were sharper than they had ever been before. He even felt every sign - the night wind blowing through the wheat, the single smile Munakata left after he'd come to check up on him, and even the tiniest movements Zenjoh made in front of

him.

-- I think I can actually get somewhere with Lieutenant Awashima this time.
Just when Kusuhara thought that--

Suddenly, Zenjoh's sheath flew, hitting Kusuhara square in the right foot with the point.

“Ow!!” He unconsciously fell on his rear, and looked up at Zenjoh as he stroked his hurt foot.“What are you doing, Zenjoh-san...!”

Zenjoh nodded slightly and said, “That's all for today.”

The next day was Kusuhara's Judgment Day.

“Lieutenant! One match please!” He called out to Awashima, and as always, took their places for a one-on-one match.

-- My path is going to be decided with this match.

Lieutenant Awashima may or may not have known that. If she did know, then she probably wouldn't go easy on him.

From the troops that gathered around them came the heckling voices of Hidaka and Fuse.

“--Kusuhara, go for it!”

“Hold out just a little longer this time!”

Gotoh and Enomoto exchanged looks. “Hey... Isn't he dragging his foot?”

“Oh... You're right.”

There was a bit of discomfort left on the foot that Zenjoh had hit. When Kusuhara asked why Zenjoh had done that this morning and the night before, all he would say was, "Good luck in your match," and didn't tell him the reason. At any rate, he didn't think that his foot would be a good excuse to Munakata. All he could do was go up against Awashima with all he had.

He stepped two, three times in his spot with his foot. He should be okay... maybe.

Readied, they faced each other.

"Alright."

Awashima's words acted as the signal for the start of the match.

Kusuhara held his sword in front of him and observed her. The point of the bamboo sword facing him moved slightly. It was the feint to bring out his rush. He'd been fooled by it many times. He knew, but his body responded anyway. And today, too--

"Yaa!" Kusuhara burst forward with a yell. It was the same counter-attack pattern. But--

-- Ow...!

When Kusuhara lunged forward with his right foot, he couldn't endure the pain and his body fell forward.

"...!?" Awashima jumped back reflexively. But Kusuhara's bamboo sword extended further than his usual timing and movements towards her bosom.

For a second, the tip sunk into her chest.

Dodging, she unwittingly pressed her left breast with her right hand.

The troops stirred.

“Yeeaaah! You got her tits!” Hidaka yelled, but shut his mouth when she glared at him.

“Ow, ouch...!” Unable to stand the pain in his foot, he took two, three steps, then fell to his knees. Awashima approached him.

“Stand, Kusuhara.”

“Ah... Ma’am!” Kusuhara hurriedly stood, and Awashima switched her sword to her left hand, then bowed. “Huh...?”

“I have failed,” she said, a large, yet bitter smile on her face. “That hit... was light, but most definitely connected.”

†

The Scepter 4 troops’ dorm bath could accommodate, at the most, around ten people. From the evening until lights out, the troops that lived in the dorms hastily bathed in rotation, by section. Zenjoh Goki would enter the empty bath once that had all finished. The space was empty, but left the faint trace of enthusiasm and clamor of a hundred troops who’d washed off the day’s sweat and dirt.

Kusuhara had accompanied him this past month, but since he’d safely completed his assignment, he would have a new position at the beginning of the week and would no longer be “out of rotation.” In the end, Kusuhara was another

young man who would simply pass by Zenjoh's side.

"...I'll wash your back," Kusuhara said to Zenjoh, who was washing himself with one hand.

"Ah, thanks." Zenjoh turned his back to him, and Kusuhara began to scrub his back with a towel.

"Zenjoh-san."

"Hm?"

"Um... Thank you for teaching me so much all this time."

"...Well, I didn't teach you anything," Zenjoh answered. The only thing that resembled training had happened over the last week, and everything else was just Kusuhara swinging his sword around himself.

"...Now that you mention it, that might be true." Zenjoh smiled wryly at Kusuhara's honest answer. But, "Oh, no, that's not what I meant," he explained himself hurriedly. "I feel like Director Munakata didn't tell me to learn from something taught by you."

"Hm?"

"Look carefully, watch and learn... He said something like that."

"...I see."

"Yes, for example," Kusuhara said, scrubbing Zenjoh's wall-like back, "I don't know if you've realized, but your back."

"...No, I don't know anything about my back. What is it?"

“Of course.” This time Kusuhara smiled wryly. “Your back is very muscular... Especially from your spine and to the right.”

“...Huh, I see.” That much was obvious, since he never used his left arm.

“This is basically all what you’ve built since you lost your left hand... Right?”

“...Huh.” He had thought that time had stopped moving within him these past ten years. However, it was possible that there were things that had accumulated in places that he couldn’t see, when he wasn’t noticing.

After a pause, Kusuhara spoke. “Um... When I first met you, I was a bit flustered.”

“Flustered...?”

“Up until last year, I was a part of the riot police... But because of me, one of my seniors got seriously injured and had to quit...” Kusuhara spoke slowly, choosing his words. “That was an incident involving superpowereds, so I thought this could be like, amends... I thought that there was something I could do, so I joined Scepter 4, but that wasn’t going so well...”

“And so that left you flustered...”

“Yes. I essentially thought I could take back my failure... But this past month, watching your back, I thought that, maybe, that’s not what it is.”

“Hm...?”

“Looking at your back, I’ve thought... That you can’t take back what you’ve lost, but people can grow again from there.”

“...I see. Now that you say that--”

-- I feel like I can be saved.

Just as Zenjoh was about to say that, there came the clattering sound of the bath door opening.

“Pardon me.”

The one who spoke and entered was the Director, Munakata Reisi. His faintly-muscled, tall body slid through the steam like a white snake.

“...Kusuhara-kun, I heard about this afternoon.”

“Ah, yes...”

“Heheh... To think you would actually be able to strike Awashima-kun.”

“Huh... But, you said, if you don’t, you’re fired...”

Munakata answered a dumbfounded Kusuhara with a sly smile. “Zenjoh-san’s instruction was also splendid,” Munakata said, facing Zenjoh. “Extending the reach and speed of a hit by relaxing the forward foot and falling into the opponent - there is a skill like that in old-style swordsmanship.”

“I don’t know it as a skill... But I do know that’s something you can do,” Zenjoh answered.

“Huh...” Kusuhara looked at his still-bruised foot.

-- If that’s true, then he should have said something to me...

By both the threat of being fired and his foot, he felt like he was being tricked by these people. However, “No, Kusuhara-kun. Had this been explained to you

beforehand, you would have been conscious of it, and Awashima-kun may have realized what you were doing. It was good that you weren't aware of it," Munakata said. "Yes. Unconscious response - that is your natural gift."

"Unconscious...?"

"Breaking designated rhythm and being easily tricked by feints are all a part of that. However, if that technique can surpass the opponent's response, then you can take what happens afterwards... In summary, it's a talent that is fit for instantaneous offense and defense."

-- I see...

He was always aware that he was easily led on by tricks, but he had never thought of it as talent.

"Use your talent to watch my back."

"Uh... Y-Yes!"

Kusuhara bowed deeply to Munakata, completely naked and still sitting on a bath stool.

Munakata smiled bitterly at that, then said, "Well then, starting now... To begin with, why don't you wash off my back?"

"Eh..." Kusuhara instinctively looked at Zenjoh, and Zenjoh nodded. "Yes!" And he faced Munakata's back.

Zenjoh washed off the bubbles of soap and submerged himself in the bathtub.

Then, he gazed towards a nervous Kusuhara who was facing Munakata's back.

Munakata's white, supple back was, in a sense, a blank sheet of paper. Who was this man, and what was he going to achieve? That was something he wasn't going to worry himself about. That was something that the young troops like Kusuhara were to decide as they looked at his back.

Before he realized it, he felt as though the baggage he'd been carrying all these years had been let down from his shoulders. Or maybe Kusuhara had washed it off a few moments before.

"My, you're smiling, Zenjoh-san," Munakata said, without turning around.

And Zenjoh answered, "It's a nice bath."

†

One week later, Kusuhara Takeru died on duty.

Chapter 4: Special Swordsmen Forces

It was a gang shootout case that involved superpowereds.

Soon after the formation of the special ops squad, it received a Beta Class emergency dispatch orders. At the site of the incident Kusuvara was shot to death, becoming the first member of Scepter 4 under the leadership of Munakata to die on duty.

The military funeral ceremony was held on the grounds of Scepter 4's HQ, under a drizzle.

“Draw your swords! Salute!”

The troops, in full-dress uniform, held their swords in front of their chests. The motion was beautifully rehearsed and mechanical, but the members could not quite hide their inner devastation, their expressions frayed around the edges.

Their work was such that it could cost them their lives... naturally, they were fully aware of this possibility when they chose to take up this duty. But it was the first time when reality in the form of a concrete fact was thrust before their eyes.

Unlike them, Zenjou had gone through the experience of losing a few tens of his colleagues in the past, but he never got used to it, even now. If anything, now that he was older and looking at the young troops, he was assaulted by a feeling much like pain, only far stronger than the one he had experienced back when he was on active duty.

Once the formal rites were over, the lines disbanded, troops returning to their

regular duties.

The tall members were leaving, soaked with the rain and walking with quick steps in every direction. In their midst, as if being buried, there stood a married couple of petite stature. They bowed their head to every member passing them by.

They were Kusuhara's parents, and they came to Tokyo from Fujioka specifically for this ceremony. Age-wise, it was still too early to call them aging, but, having lost their only son, the spouses looked conspicuously small and old.

Zenjou stopped, rooted to the spot and staring only at them.

Across from the couple, a man in mourning clothes, who was speaking to them, spotted Zenjou and, dragging one foot slightly, approached him. "... You are Zenjou-san, aren't you?"

The man straightened himself and bowed to him. Judging by that gesture, he belonged either to the military or to the police.

"My name is Tamura," the man introduced himself. "Takeru... I mean, Kusuhara-kun would mail me once in a while. In the message he sent the other day... Kusuhara-kun wrote that he was finally on his way to becoming a full-fledged member thanks to you, Zenjou-san."

Urged by Tamura, Zenjou stepped in front of Kusuhara's parents.

"Thank you for holding such a grand ceremony..." the parents bowed to him, almost as if in a prayer, and he could only say, "No..." before falling silent.

"...Zenjou-san," Tamura finally asked, breaking the lengthy silence. "Was

Takeru commendable?”

Zenjou could answer nothing. Casting down his eyes and keeping his silence was all he could manage.

“No... he wasn’t,” someone murmured in his stead from the side.

“Hey, stop it, Hidaka.”

“Get a clue, man, a clue!”

There stood Hidaka, Fuse, Gotou and Enomoto; the four ex-members of squad 4 must have walked up to them when no one was looking.

“He was a guy with a future... with a potential that he needed to realize in that future.”

Neither Tamura nor Zenjou could reply anything to that. Kusuhara’s mother pressed a handkerchief to her mouth and started sobbing.

“Like hell I’d wrap it up with a noncommittal yes-he-was-grea— ow!”

“...Moron.” Fuse smacked Hidaka upside the head and glanced towards Gotou. Gotou gave him a small nod and together, they took Hidaka under the arms on both sides and, giving a salute to Kusuhara’s parents, dragged him away.

Only Enomoto was left next to Tamura and Kusuhara’s parents, and he hastened to apologize, “I’m sorry. It was inconsiderate of him at a time like this...”

“No, you shouldn’t be sorry.... Takeru was blessed with good senpais. To be

loved wherever he went... it is so like him.”

“Haha, that is true... isn’t it, Zenjou-san?” Scratching his head, Enomoto looked up at Zenjou.

Zenjou only bowed to Tamura and Kusuhara’s parents and turned to take his leave without a single word.

“Ahh...” Enomoto made to stop him but let his hand fall away halfway through the motion. “How about we go inside...? You shouldn’t stay here in this cold...”

Hearing Enomoto’s voice behind him, Zenjou kept going away with long strides.

Inside him, a hot storm was raging. The energy with no way out threatened to explode from inside his body.

His feet carried him towards Munakata’s office in the main building - a place he would normally avoid getting close to.

Inside the office, besides Munakata, there was another member of the troops he was not familiar with.



Pushing him aside, he stalked towards Munakata, who was putting his soaked coat on a hanger. Munakata turned to him, and Zenjou grabbed him by the lapels, slamming his back against the wall. For a second the tall Munakata's feet were dangling in the air as he was lifted clean off the floor with Zenjou's one good arm.

Zenjou was glaring at him, eyes tinged with an obvious killing intent, growl

escaping his throat.

“Oh, Zenjou-san... You are making a much better face today,” Munakata said with that thin smile of his, same as usual.

“Ahm... Captain,” the member from earlier drawled languidly from behind Zenjou. His dark eyes behind the glasses were smirking with cynicism. “If you’re in the middle of something, maybe I should come back later?”

“No, no need.” As Munakata replied, the member turned to Zenjou, “Then... Zenjou-san, was it? Could you postpone that till my business here is finished? I’d like to get it over with already...”

Zenjou looked down to get a better look at him. The operative wore a blue uniform but did not look to be affiliated with the swordsmen division. Zenjou had never seen this young man on the grounds nor in the dojo before. At a glance, he had refined features, but there was a slight hoodlum edge about the way he held himself. It created a disparity, making him come across as somewhat twisted.

The member shrugged his shoulders and took a step back. The way he kept his distance was also expertly. Strength of a very different nature than that of Awashima and the other troops could be felt in him, the strength of one well used to fighting.

“This is Fushimi Saruhiko-kun, from the Intelligence Division. I am transferring him to the special operations squad starting tomorrow,” Munakata explained.

“...I see.” After a pause, Zenjou let go of the King, “I apologize for the interruption.” He turned his back to both Munakata and Fushimi and headed for the door.

“Ah, please wait, Zenjou-san,” Putting his disheveled collar in order, Munakata called out to stop him. “You have come at the perfect time, I was about to call for you myself... I would like you to listen to what I have to say.”

†

—Kusuhara Takeru’s death had a special meaning to it.

That was what Munakata said to his two subordinates, Zenjou and Fushimi.

The emergency dispatch happened on the same day Kusuhara had been transferred to the special ops squad. The case involved 3 Beta Class superpowereds.

It was not rare for strains who were not affiliated with superpowereds’ organizations to get easily roped into participating in criminal gangs and political extremist groups. That day’s case also started with a skirmish between criminal gangs for division of the spheres of influence.

It turned into a large-scale incident that mobilized not only the Blue King Munakata and the special ops squad, but also the regular swordsmen squads 1 and 2; however, since Beta cases had been occurring on an all too regular basis in the past few months, the one they had on their hands was not deemed anything atypical at the time.

The superpowereds, confirmed at the site, were promptly suppressed by the

members of the special ops squad. That also went as usual, not giving any reason to consider the operation atypical either.

However, what happened immediately after was—

Kusuhara got shot with a handgun that one of the superpowereds had hidden.

For superpowereds - and especially those of Beta Class - to rely on something as common as firearms was very unusual. And this belief was what had proven to be the fatal blind spot for Scepter 4. Moreover,

“His target was not squadsman Kusuhara... but myself.”

Out of all the troops in Munakata’s immediate vicinity, Kusuhara was the only one to react to the gun. Instinct and reflexes—



It was Kusuhara's first opportunity to put his unique talent to use; it also became his last.

Guided by his reflexes, Kusuhara jumped into the line of fire. But he had not yet mastered his own superability enough to be able to instantaneously deploy his probability singularity field and repel the bullet.

As a result, the bullet, fired from behind Munakata's back and bound for his

heart, hit Kusuhara in the head. His death was instant.

“Squadsman Kusuhara died, sacrificing himself for me. This is the undeniable truth.”

Assassination of the Blue King Munakata Reishi - this was the true goal of the invisible “enemy”. The criminal gangs were no more than tools used by that “enemy” for his own ends.

Since some time ago, there had been signs. The sudden onslaught of cases involving Beta Class superpowereds was by no means a chance occurrence but a result of someone pulling strings behind the scene— and this was not his imagination running wild but a pragmatic conclusion.

Kusuhara’s incident had proven it beyond doubt: the series of those cases could no longer be regarded as simple accidents.

It was an attack attempt targeting Scepter 4 itself.

A clan of people with superpowers like Scepter 4 was a powerful organization far exceeding the boundaries of the civilian society, but at the same time it had a crucial vulnerability. There existed a possibility of the organization collapsing in an instant in case of death of its top brass or its king who stood at the very top of it.

—Squadsman Kusuhara’s death had two meanings to it, said Munakata.

The first one was, in exchange for his life, he was able to protect Scepter 4.

And the other one was, using the opportunity his death created, Scepter 4 was going to be reborn as an even stronger and tougher organization.

†

Scepter 4 got to business utilizing every means at their disposal in an attempt to uncover any trace left by the “enemy”. They started what is called “active intelligence gathering”, except their methods pushed the boundaries of typical police activity geared towards preservation of public safety.

All sorts of information flowed in: the data that Annex 4 itself had accumulated on superpowereds, records from every field operation conducted until just a few days ago, judicial and administrative information obtained through application of Code Blue, complete with the data that a test run of the digital surveillance system “Yuishiki” provided—

Before long, miscellaneous pieces of information started to fall into place, coming together to form the whole picture.

An 8-storey multiuse building located in a corner of Kamikouzuka business district in Toyosawa ward. A few Beta Class superpowereds were spotted coming in and out of it. At the very least there were 8 of them. That count banned any possibility of their comings and goings being accidental. Two of them were involved in a recent Beta Class incident and had been arrested.

And finally, on the 15th day since Kusuhara’s death—

10 large vehicles pulled up to surround the site: 9 were personnel transport trucks and one a command-and-intelligence vehicle. The anti-superpowereds organization Scepter 4 had ordered mobilization of its entire sword-armed force.

The highways had already been sealed and civilians had been evacuated out of

the sieged building through cooperation of the local police that Scepter 4 enlisted.

One by one, men in blue uniforms with sabers strapped to their waist came out of the transport trucks, lining up in neat rows with agile movements. After the regular swordsmen squads 1 through 4, the special ops squad followed—

The last one to come out of the special ops squad's truck was the one-armed giant of a man, Zenjou Gouki. At his waist, he wore a very long saber, modeled after a large wide-bladed longsword.

"We've confirmed 6 Beta Class and 11 Common Class superpowereds inside, as well as 5 non-powereds; 22 people in total. This case is on a completely different scale than anything we handled before, so prepare yourselves for a fierce battle. However..." Awashima addressed the lines of troops, "...our foremost objective is information gathering. So I trust you to make every effort and gain control of the situation while avoiding unnecessary bloodshed as much as possible regardless of whether it's a superpowered you're up against or a non-powered."

"Lieutenant," Hidaka raised his hand. "Can interpret your "as much as possible" as a recommendative "preferably"?“ Hidaka asked, his left hand fiddling with the lock of his saber and his eyes devoid of any trace of humor.

”“As much as possible”,“ Awashima did not compromise.

"Moron," Fuse smacked Hidaka upside the head.

”—Well, that's the spirit, as they say.” As Munakata approached, Awashima

stepped away, ceding her position to him. After casting a look around and surveying the troops, who immediately straightened themselves under his gaze, Munakata recited:

“We will carry out the duty entrusted to those wearing swords. Permitting neither chaos on the holy ground nor violence in this drab world,

We will advance with swords in hand,

for our cause is pure.”

“Men, draw your swords!” “Yes, sir!”

At Awashima’s command, Akiyama, Benzai, Kamo, Doumyouji – all the members of the special ops squad lined up in one line released the lock on the sabers at their waists, drawing their swords one by one. Blue glow engulfed the blades as each of them unleashed their superpower.

Munakata was the last one to unsheathe his sword. His blade emitted light of a completely different level of intensity than his subordinates’, bathing his surroundings in it.

As if drawn out by the power of their king, the troops’ power also strengthened, dying the whole neighborhood blue.

Inside the command-and-intelligence vehicle, the personnel of the Intelligence unit of the special ops squad were reporting the situation, checking the data provided by the on-board information system and displayed on the monitors.

“Activation of Captain Munakata’s sanctum, confirmed.”

““The Sword of Damocles”, taking physical form.“

One of the members in front of the monitors turned around.

"Fushimi-san...?"

The chief of the intelligence Unit Fushimi was looking up at the sky out the vehicle's window. "...Ahh, it's visible now."

High in the sky up above the building a sword-shaped crystalline object was being conjured, its view partly cut off due to the window being small.

“Huuuge....” Fushimi narrowed his eyes, letting a cynical smile tug at the corners of his lips, “...Jeez, what a stupidly huge thing...”

†

“—Charge in!”

Together with Awashima's command, power in the building was cut off. A saber reinforced with superability cut through the lock on the fire door like a knife through butter, opening the way. The operatives of the special ops squad poured in, proceeding to the top floor of the building which was going to serve as the site of this operation.

The only weapon the members were equipped with was a standard-issue saber. Conventional weapons and protective gear were ineffective when combating superpowereds; if anything, weight and restrictions they posed on the freedom of movement could easily prove fatal.

Inside, there was a barricade made with overturned tables. From the safety of it, several men fired bullets and threw bladed weapons imbued with their psychic

powers.

The members of the special ops squad held up their sabers, consciously concentrating and extending the field from the blades forward, creating a shield of light to fend off the attacks.

Once the shield was in place, one of the members contracted his field to a narrow blade of light and launched it at the attackers, cutting the barricade clean in two, bisected pieces of it clattering as they fell to the floor. That done, another operative made a few thrusting motions not unlike fencing, and small balls of light flew off the tip of his blade, piercing the shoulders and thighs of the enemies, who were now out in the open, like bullets.

The troop members of Scepter 4 were official clansmen, who had their talent blossom and perfected under the Blue King. That was why the level of their abilities was in sharp contrast with that of Strains, who were only masterless strays.

Naturally, the fact did not preclude danger completely. A member, who focused on offense, risked getting his moment of defenselessness exploited and targeted by another one of the enemies. Also, since a small number of non-powereds armed with guns were mixed in the fray, there existed the possibility of a surprise attack from them to stay vigilant against at all times.

For that reason, the troops continued fighting while making sure to watch their squadmates' backs in their defenseless moments and cover each other's blind spots.

As far as odds went, practiced orderliness was what could be deemed the key element to having the upper hand in melee.

But—

Hidaka rushed in ahead of the line. “Hey, you’re too far ahead!”

Ignoring his comrade’s warning in favor of chasing after the retreating enemies, Hidaka charged ahead alone. “Doncha run away from me!” he howled at them. “C’mom, bring out your arrows, guns or whatever it is you got! Try to hit me! If you can, that is!”

As if in response to his challenge, a small can-like object rolled to his feet.

—A hand grenade?!

Given that they fought a closed quarters battle in a confined space, no one considered the possibility of explosives being actually brought into play.

Reflexively, Hidaka and the other squad members behind him put up their light shields, poised forward.

The “can” detonated, blinding light and thunderous roar stunning the operatives. A flash grenade, then.

Hidaka, isolated up in front, took the brunt of the enemy attack. Rendered blind and deaf, he had no means to protect himself, and his comrades could not help him - maintaining their own shields through loss of bearings and blurry vision took all of their concentration. “Hidaka...!”

Before Hidaka’s unseeing eyes, a black wall sprang up. No, what looked like a

wall was actually an enormous back. The one-armed giant – Zenjou Gouki – had wedged himself between Hidaka and the enemy.

His saber was not drawn. The scabbard he was casually holding with an underhand grip glowed with bluish white light.

Not changing the grip, Zenjou raised the scabbard above his head and slashed with it downward and sideways. The bullets and blades imbued with psychic powers that were flying at Hidaka got knocked down all at once.

That done, with a thrust of his elbow, Zenjou sent Hidaka, who was trying to feel his way to keep going forward, flying backward.

“Gha...!” Breath knocked out of him by the blow, Hidaka flopped down gracelessly onto his fellow squadsmen.

The moment the enemy’s attention switched from Hidaka to Zenjou,

Slam—

Zenjou attacked.

Reinforcing his jump foot with his superpower, he bridged the distance of 5 meters in one stride, plunging straight into the thick of the enemy group.

Making full use of the momentum, the first blow from his saber’s scabbard broke an arm of one of his opponents, the second blow dug the scabbard’s tip deep into another opponent’s solar plexus. Another step, and another enemy folded in two having his kneecap kicked out from under him. The last attacker tried to run, only to be brought down with a slash to the back.

4 superpowereds had been taken care of in the blink of an eye.

One of the defeated enemies was still conscious. Producing a gun he had hidden on him, he fired.

Zenjou made a waving motion with his hand, like swatting a fly. His scabbard, still imbued with light, flicked the bullet away.

“Zenjou-san...” was all Enomoto, busy nursing Hidaka, could express.

“...Are you a monster?” Fuse asked, sounding utterly dumbfounded.

Zenjou answered nothing.

The one-armed demonic swordsman simply stood there vacantly stock still, exuding an aura, that overwhelmed friends or foes alike.

†

Room by room, the enemy was gradually retreating deeper and deeper inside the building.

The troops were in pursuit, switching positions back and forth among themselves to make sure that their backs and blind spots stayed covered at all times, slipping deeper into the bowels of the floor like one fused being.

The enemy counterattacked precisely and tenaciously. Several operatives had been injured, falling victims to sly combinations similar to the one Hidaka was subjected to: a concentrated offensive in the wake of a surprise attack.

The odds were not improving as the time went by: although none of the wounds suffered were grave, as the number of the injured and retreating

members increased, the overall advance of the troops slowed down, the momentum slowly ebbing away. As for the enemy, they could no longer afford to shelter their wounded; those left behind were put into anti-strain restraints and escorted to the back.

Although both sides were exhausted, Scepter 4 seemed to be gaining the upper hand, except—

‘Looks like we’re playing right into the enemy’s hands, here,’ Fushimi commented over the intercom link when he contacted Munakata at the site. ‘Their equipment isn’t exactly adequate and their level of proficiency with their powers is low. All the same, they seem awfully well versed in the anti-superpowereds tactics that we use. And their team work is well coordinated.’

From the GPS position data, as well as the encounter location information that PDAs of each member sent, the positioning of the entire force was mapped out on the monitors around Fushimi. Moreover, the location of the enemies was also being tracked down manually based on the footage from wearable cameras that a few operatives were equipped with and audio reports.

’...To top it off, this is not exactly going like your typical siege.’

Munakata nodded in agreement. “Yes, by employing the tactics of abandoning disposable footsoldiers at the site once they lose their use, the enemy is attempting to wear our forces down.”

‘Those footsoldiers must be insanely loyal to go through with a plan like that without objection, huh.’

“—Or, possibly, they are simply being used by whoever it is that stands behind them.”

'Either way, we can't take the mounting exhaustion of our forces lightly. I suggest we temporary retreat and regroup before someone finally dies.'

“Hm...” was Munakata’s non-answer to the crudely expressed suggestion. Putting a hand to his chin, he looked to be deep in thought, listening to the clamor of battle raging up ahead.

Just then—

“Captain.” Enomoto ran up to him. “This is a PDA we seized from one of the captured enemies.”

The all-purpose PDA that Enomoto held out was a commonplace market model you could find anywhere.

What was strange about it was—that it had signal.

Before the troops charged in, all operations of the base station providing mobile communications coverage for the area had been temporary suspended on the authority of Scepter 4. So the enemy established a communication channel through some other peculiar means... this was the only explanation.

Enomoto called up the call and address logs. “The opponents we’re fighting are, most likely, a hastily gathered group. They call each other by their assigned numbers.”

Munakata checked the display of the PDA. “22 contacts in total - from “Number 1” to “Number 22”, huh.” "Yes. Although, there is also "Number 0" on

the list.“ “Oh...?”

At this site, they were dealing with 22 opponents. At least that was how it was supposed to be according to Scepter 4’s intelligence. However, —there were 22 opponents, plus “Number 0”.

In other words, a personage who, in the past half a month, had all but completely avoided all the nets they set up, was present somewhere on this floor.

“I would certainly like to meet them. No... I am being invited, in fact? What is their location?”

“They seem to be in the room called "reception office"...“

“Fushimi-kun.”

‘The corner room of the south-west wing... at the end of the hallway and at the heart of the enemy-controlled territory.’

“I see.”

‘For the record: I do think it’s a trap.’

“Well then...” Munakata smiled.

“—But it’s dangerous, sir.”

“I do not doubt it is,” Munakata calmly answered Awashima’s protest. “Awashima-kun. I ask you and the rest of the troops to hold this position for another, let’s see... 15 minutes should be enough. If, by some chance, I am not back in 15 minutes, feel free to give retreat orders at your discretion and in accordance with the situation.”

“But...” Awashima opened her mouth to protest again but fell silent, leaving her objection unfinished.

As he gazed in the direction of the unknown “enemy” on the other side of the walls, a daring expression she had never seen before adorned Munakata’s countenance. “Well then, shall we go?”

Turning around, Munakata ordered tersely, “Accompany me, Zenjou.”

Without a word, Zenjou stared at Munakata, then took a step forward just as wordlessly.

Munakata started towards the heart of the enemy territory with long strides, and Zenjou followed close behind.

About a dozen of enemies that still remained and were lying in hiding, launched a barrage of attacks on the two people casually walking right down the middle of the hallway. Blades and bullets imbued with the attackers’ powers, as well as regular lead ammo and even lumps of concrete were fired and thrown at the two from all sides—

Munakata, smile on his lips never faltering, dodged the attacks or repelled them with a light flick of his wrist. Behind him, Zenjou, half-turned with his left shoulder jutting out a little, parried the attacks that came from behind, wielding the scabbard in his right hand with precision.

He also had time to dish out strong blows left and right with the scabbard as he walked. A hit from the scabbard, charged with his concentrated aura, punched through the walls and crushed barricades, knocking out the enemies in what was

a very one-sided confrontation.

Bathed in the concentrated gunfire and psychic attacks, Munakata and Zenjou kept walking, never missing a step.

It took them less than a minute to reach the so-called “reception office”. Passing through was all they did, simply strolling along the hallway a few dozens of meters in length. Nothing more than that.

Yet the enemies that they had passed fell silent in their hiding spots - likely due to completely losing any fighting spirit they had.

Zenjou pushed the door to the “reception office”. It was not locked. Casting a quick look around the room, Zenjou was about to set foot inside but suddenly paused.

“Is something wrong?”

Zenjou wordlessly stepped aside, and Munakata entered the room.

A glance, and—

“Aah, well... we have been tricked, positively,” Munakata said with a wry smile.

†

The one to receive Munakata and Zenjou in the “reception office” was a black kitten.

It was sitting on a table, meowing quietly.

“Hehe... So you are "Number 0"?“

Jumping off the table, the kitten came closer, and Munakata leaned down reaching out his hand towards it. The kitten dodged it though, opting to nuzzle against Zenjou's feet instead.

Munakata smiled a troubled smile. "Ever since I remember myself, I have always been disliked by animals."

The kitten wore a green collar on its neck, which had a small box-shaped object attached to it.

Zenjou strapped the scabbard of his saber back to his hip and kneeled down. Holding out his hand to the kitten and lightly petting its head with his fingertips, he deftly unfastened the collar and presented it to Munakata.

Munakata took and carefully examined it. "I see. Someone was apparently providing the superpowereds instructions via this transponder... Its make seems quite elaborate, too."

The corners of his beautifully shaped lips lifted in a delicate smile. "Green... It is a color I'm not fond of."

Munakata raised his head and let the tension seep out from his shoulders. "Well then, this is it for today... I suppose."

With that, he looked around the "reception office" they were currently in. Just as the name suggested, the room struck the beholder as mostly empty save for a table, a sofa and a few decorative trinkets. A huge picture window overlooking the city took up one entire wall.

Wielding his sword alongside his subordinates and defeating anyone who

dared to stand in his way in pursuit of the invisible “enemy”, Munakata had arrived to an answer... which turned out to be this gigantic blank.

“We were certainly led around by the nose this time... Still, this, too, is a big step forward,” Munakata said. “I am sure that today’s combat experience will prove invaluable come a time when we have to do battle with the other Clans. The fact that I could finally welcome you, Zenjou-san, as part of the special operations squad is also significant. It would not be an exaggeration to say that everything is going the way it should.”

But—

“..."Everything”, huh?” Zenjou muttered.

”...Oh?”

As if sensing something in Zenjou’s tone, Munakata turned off the intercom on his collar. ”...Zenjou-san. Let us have a little private chat before we summon Awashima-kun and the others.“

"Haah..." Zenjou made a puzzled face.

Munakata continued. “I believe Kusuhara-kun had asked you a question along the same lines once before... namely, had the man named Zenjou Gouki lost his value the moment he lost his left arm?”

Munakata looked pointedly at Zenjou’s left arm with a stare so direct that some would find it rude. “My answer would be “no”. I would even go as far as to say that it is through the loss of your arm that you have achieved completion.“

The kitten was purring and rubbing its head against Zenjou’s fingertips, while

Zenjou himself remained silent.

"In the same fashion, through the loss of squadsman Kusuhara, my Scepter 4 is now on its way to completion. A death was necessary for the organization to achieve the state of completion... it might be prudent to put it this way."

"...He..." Zenjou finally said after a lengthy pause. "Kusuhara was meant to die, is that what you're saying?"

Zenjou stood up, and the kitten, sensing signs of anger in him, jumped back.

"Well..." Munakata pushed up his glasses, his expression unreadable due to being half-hidden with his hand. "If I said "yes"... would you slay me?" he asked. "The same way you did your king, the Blue King Habari Jin, in the past?"

"...!"

Zenjou's expression underwent a change. Shock, anger - no, emotions even more violent than these were warping his face.

"July of 199X, the Kagutsu incident, and the moment that decided it... Caught up in the range, affected by the power outburst from the Red King, Kagutsu Genji, Habari Jin's Sword of Damocles was also rapidly losing stability. That is, there existed an extremely high probability of chain eruptions of king's powers being triggered."

Munakata kept talking, even as Zenjou's face froze in an expression of fury.

"Were two such outbursts to occur at the same time and place, theoretically, the resulting amount of energy, exponentially increased due to synergistic effect, would be enough to submerge the whole Kanto region after burning it down to

cinders...It is not at all far-fetched to surmise that the country itself would collapse in the aftermath."

As if seeking to draw out a reaction from Zenjou, Munakata continued his monologue. "At that moment, one King's life was weighed against the future of a whole country on the scale of fate. And a single God-spun stroke of your sword saved this country by delivering instant death to the Blue King and, consequently, obliterating his Sword of Damocles faster than an outburst could occur—"

Zenjou was not answering. He stood there silent, with his gaze boring into the floor.

—True, he was the one to slay Habari. He did not mean to avert his eyes from that fact. But at the same time, that action was not entirely his own judgement... he could not help thinking of it this way. His longsword flew out of its sheath smoothly and naturally - neither by his own will nor by someone's expectations, but driven by something akin to an impulse of tremendous magnitude.

But, that, again, would still mean—

—that it was he who had slain Habari. That fact stood, unquestionable, and its weight was not going to disappear any time soon.

More than 10 years had passed, but he still was not sure if what he had done at the time was right.



Only, the image of Habari that had been burned into his mind—

“—That’s right. That’s how it should be.” Habari smiled as he said that, bright and refreshing, and this memory was the only thing that kept him going.

“Yes... You were right.”

—was now being overlayed with the image of Munakata before him.

—No, this was wrong.

This man was not Habari. Not his king, crystal pure to the point of transparency.

Zenjou's hand reached for the hilt of the saber strapped to his hip, and froze on it, unmoving.

Zenjou hesitated.

Who was this man? What was lurking in the depths of his smile? Was he toying with people's lives simply out of sickening wickedness of his heart? Or was he someone so great, with resolve to pursue justice so adamant that it defied understanding by a mere mortal?

He lost count to how many thousand, tens thousand times he kept asking himself those questions ever since meeting Munakata Reishi. They continued to remain complicated still, with no clear answer forthcoming.

Like a demon, or a beast, Zenjou let out a roar. The ferocious will, dwelling inside him, was gnashing its teeth helplessly, chained.

—Should he cut down the man in front of him, or should he not?

The two wills, two powers clashed within him violently, strained chains grinding against one another.

Something was welling up rapidly in his chest. It felt as though his blood was boiling, and his muscles were about to rupture throughout his entire body.

Zenjou raised his downcast eyes, fixing Munakata with a stare that was loaded

with spirit so intense that it could very well kill, yet Munakata met it head-on and with a fearless smile on his lips.

That's when—

Something that had nothing to do with his will, something that was much bigger than that, burst open within Zenjou.

Inside the long scabbard, immense power swelled up and exploded.

The demon's blade flew out of its sheath, spraying the broken scabbard's fragments all around.

Epilogue: Sword of Damocles

As Zenjou's sword, glowing with radiant blue light, destroyed its scabbard on the draw, its point slashed across the space mere centimeters away from Munakata's nose.

—No.

A few things happened simultaneously: the glass of the huge picture window shattered, a firework of sparks blossomed along the path of the demon blade, a portion of the wall blew out and a fist-sized hole opened in it.

The identity of the thing that was responsible for shattering the glass, spraying a shower of sparks in midair and making a hole in the wall was one and the same.

Namely, a 12.7mm round from a rifle.

The heavy bullet that came zipping in at the supersonic speed breaking the window on its way in, was repelled by Zenjou's saber, reinforced with his superpower.

The black kitten bolted to hide under the sofa with a squeal.

—A sniper...?!

The person most shocked at the realization was Zenjou himself, despite also being the one to prevent said sniper from succeeding.

The action he took was not conscious.

Sensing the supersonic bullet with his animal instincts, he drew his sword and knocked the shot down on physical reflexes alone.

Just then, abruptly, Zenjou's body twirled again, hand slashing through the space behind him even as his back was still turned to the window.

Another shower of sparks flared in the air.

The second shot got knocked off course to lodge in the wall as well.

Zenjou, with a motion that gave the adversary no openings to exploit, turned to the window and stood ready.

Another 2, 3 seconds passed - the third shot was not coming.

Munakata turned on the intercom. "Fushimi-kun. We came under a sniper attack." He glanced at the holes in the wall. "The weapon used was probably a large caliber anti-materiel rifle. The sniper's location is, most likely—"

'There's a skyscraper in 2 clicks west-southwest.'

"Yes, most likely there. Please notify the police."

'Already on it.'

Fushimi had already estimated the sniper's location from the blueprint of the room Munakata was in and the shooting range of the rifle used. Capturing the sniper was the police's jurisdiction, and Fushimi initiated the necessary urgent search procedures with them.

"Very well." Munakata cut off the intercom link once again.

—A sniper attack from 2,000 meters away using an AMR.

Exceptional organizational capability was required to arrange for a large type of a sniper rifle like that along with a proficient sniper to handle it and successfully orchestrate the assassination attempt. Such resourcefulness of the “enemy” exceeded even Munakata’s expectations.

Scepter 4 possessed a special right to inspect all sorts of public and official information networks in the metropolitan area, but it was not unusual for them to fall a step behind when it came to information not pertaining to supernatural factors.

If it had not been for Zenjou, the enemy’s bullet, having slipped through the gaps in their information network and fired into the dead zone of their awareness, would have blown Munakata’s head off, there could be no doubt about it.

“So this is today’s final trap... or should I say, all the other moves that the enemy has made thus far were for the sole purpose of luring me into this situation,” Munakata said unruffled.

“...Why?” Zenjou asked.

“”Why” as in “why did I intentionally step into the enemy’s trap and expose myself to danger”?“ Munakata inquired. “Because nothing ventured, nothing gained. In order to draw out reactions from the unknown enemy and obtain intelligence on them, using myself as a bait was the optimal choice... although, that, too, only went well thanks to the strongest bodyguard one could possibly ask for, Zenjou Gouki, escorting me.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Zenjou said. “...Why did you feel the need to provoke me?”

“Ah, that... Hehe.” At Munakata’s chuckle, Zenjou’s face turned even more grim. “This world is like a puzzle that one can only unravel through laborious effort put into facing it. That is how I view it... however, sometimes I feel like throwing reason to the wind and surrendering myself to heaven’s decree.”

“Heaven’s decree...?”

“Zenjou-san. Your sword is yours but, at the same time, it is not.” Munakata shifted his gaze to the saber, now naked in Zenjou’s hand. “A slash of your sword dealt quicker than you gain awareness of your action, surpasses the will of a mere mortal, becoming a manifestation of providence of sorts, in my opinion... that is, heaven’s decree itself.”

Zenjou answered nothing, only let out a low growl through clenched teeth.

A pair of eyes with the spirit of a demon dwelling in them stared at Munakata. What these eyes saw was Munakata Reishi’s bottomless smile. An ambiguous smile.

Zenjou’s right hand, holding the saber, was heavy with power. But so long as that smile remained ambiguous, Zenjou’s hand would not move. Could not swing the sword.

“Shall we go?”

Turning his back to Zenjou, Munakata started walking. “...Someday, when you see through the person that I am to the deepest bottom, perhaps you will

decide to slay me.”

Zenjou followed him, staring at the nape of Munakata’s neck as if ready to bite into it any moment.

“You are a swift blade, as well as a bomb on the verge of explosion. You are part of my power, yet at the same time beyond my control. In other words, Zenjou-san...” Munakata smiled, exposing his defenseless back to the gaze of the demon. “...to me, you are another “Sword of Damocles”, involved in my fate.”

†

30 minutes later, having subjugated the remnants of the enemy and secured custody of all the superpowereds and non-powereds at the site, 22 names in total (and one animal), Scepter 4’s mission was complete. With damage suffered in action by the allied parties being negligible, for the first proactive sortie, the result left nothing to be desired.

After leaving the building that served as the site of the operation and calling in the police to deal with the post-proceedings, the troops lined up in rows on the road in front of the entrance.

Formally, the state of battle readiness would be terminated only with Munakata’s coming out of the building.

“Present your swords!”

At Awashima’s command, the troops assumed the posture of the sword salute appropriate for welcoming the head of the organization and, when Munakata

finally came in sight, held their breaths.

Passing through the entrance, Munakata kept walking calmly. Zenjou was slowly trailing after him with the naked sword in hand, like a beast ready to sink its fangs into its victim at the first sight of an opening...

As Munakata stepped into the street, he looked up into the clear sky, squinting at the bright light. There, right above his head, the enormous crystalline “Sword of Damocles” was floating, producing a groaning sound as it did, with its tip pointed at him.

Letting an enigmatic smile tug at his lips, Munakata started walking again.

Living under a sword rasping overhead and followed by a demon at his heels baring its fangs at his back, he simply walked forward with an air of composure, paying no mind to either. Even with the danger of death and destruction so close by his side, his confidence was unwavering.

The Blue King, Munakata Reishi, truly was the embodiment of the man destined to be a supreme ruler.



Side Story: Kuro and Zenjoh

“I would like you to lend me your cat.” A female officer came to the file room to ask this of him.

She was rather petite, with big glasses, and she introduced herself as Yoshino. It couldn’t have been long since she joined Scepter 4, Zenjou guessed. It was obvious that she had yet to get used to the brand new internal affairs division uniform she was wearing, and to him she looked like a kid who tried on those clothes. As soon as she saw Zenjou she first nodded, then suddenly realized something, exclaimed, “Ah! The bow!” and bowed deeper in haste.

The general affairs section office got infested with mice, she explained. “So they came up with the idea that we need a cat. And you keep a cat that looks perfectly suitable for the task, Zenjou-san.”

“Well, there is a cat around here, but it’s not like I keep it...”

A cat’s meowl resounded from around his feet. The cat in question was black and young.

“Oh, excuse me.” Zenjou was about to open a can of cat food. Once he unloaded the contents into the cat bowl at his feet, the cat stuck its head into it

and started eating. When it first came here, it was a little kitten that could easily fit into one's pocket; since then, three months had passed, and now the cat weighted at least twice what it did back then.

“What is the kitty’s name?”

“I call him Kuro.”

“Kuro-chan, then?”

“Yeah... he’s black, after all.” [T/N: ‘kuro’ means ‘black’ in Japanese]

“I see. Black, indeed,” Yoshino agreed meekly. “So, Zenjou-san, you feed him regularly like this and keep his litterbox tidy, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that what’s generally called ‘keeping a pet’...?”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Then, in your opinion, what does ‘keeping a pet’ imply?”

“Well... if the kept himself says that he’s being kept, then it’s probably true.”

Yoshino looked at the black cat on the floor, then shifted her eyes back to Zenjou. “The kept himself, huh...”

“Yeah.”

“Then, whom should I ask to lend me this Kuro-chan...? Him directly?”

“No... Just take him. Being a cat, he won’t understand you anyway even if you ask him.”

“Since he is a cat, huh...”

The mice usually appeared at night, so the two decided that Yoshino would take the cat and its belongings to the general affairs office, and the black cat would live there for about a week.

“I promise I will take good care of him.”

“Alright.”

However, the next morning Yoshino visited the file room again, and Zenjou was expecting her.

“Ah, I thought so.”

“Yeah, well, I was about to go to your office myself.” Zenjou was holding the black cat with his only hand. When he got to work that morning, he found the meowing cat in front of the file room’s door.

“As I thought, he came back here.”

“Yeah.”

“It does look like Kuro-chan is your kitty, Zenjou-san. He himself seems to

think so.”

“I wonder about that.”

“Still, he is indispensable to us, too, as we’re in need of his help. Only yesterday, he has already caught three mice.”

“I see.”

Yoshino squatted before the door and pointed her finger at its lower part. “So, for example, we could make a catdoor here.”

“Huh?”

“So that he could go to our office from here, I mean.”

“I don’t really mind, but...”

“If we do this, the cat food expences would be deducted from the general affairs budget; that would be of help to you, too, Zenjou-san, right?”

“I see where you’re going with that. Even a cat should work off its keep.”

At that, Yoshino raised her head and said resolutely, “No, this is only between humans. It does not concern Kuro-chan.”

“...Huh?”

“A cat should remain a cat.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

The cat jumped off Zenjou’s arm and looked up at him, meowing as if to complain about something.

“Seems like he’s hungry.”

“...Yeah.”

Zenjou turned and headed into the room only to remember that he had given all the cat food stock he had to the girl yesterday.

“Here, please take it.” Yoshino produced a small can from the pocket of her uniform and presented it to Zenjou. “I’ll go bring back Kuro-chan’s litterbox and bed.”

With this, she turned on her heels, walked three steps and suddenly exclaimed, “Ah! The bow!”

The can of cat food in hand, Zenjou returned the greeting.

“Meow,” the cat at his feet meowed.